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Classroom of the Elite  
Year 3

ANIME ANYWAY  
TRANSLATIONS

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3年生編

衣笠彰梧  
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**It's not just about one person.  
We'll seize our Class A graduation together.**





**It's only natural that my class will graduate as Class A.  
And I will definitely defeat Ayanokoji.**





**The process doesn't matter.**  
As long as I win in the end, that's all that matters.





**There's nothing impossible for our class.  
We will absolutely graduate as Class A.**







# Translation Team Note

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# Prologue: The End of Everyday Life

I suppressed my inner excitement and arrived at school a little earlier than usual. Climbing the stairs I hadn't yet grown accustomed to, I eventually reached the floor where the third-year classroom was located. Before long, I spotted my classroom with a "Class 3A" sign plate. I stopped in my tracks and stared at the polished plate.

“Finally, we’ve arrived...”

Even though it still doesn't fully feel real, I know that everything unfolding before my eyes was no dream. From Class 1D to Class 3A. There were many moments of joy and happiness— But what must not be forgotten are the painful experiences. The road everyone traveled was by no means smooth.

Yamauchi-kun, Sakura-san and Maezono-san. Without their sacrifices, we would never have made it this far. I can never forget that.

Thinking back to my early days at school, I had no clear goal. I had come merely to follow in my older brother's footsteps. And yet, the distance between us remained unchanged— he always met me with cold indifference. Even so, as my school life progressed, I learned my brother's true feelings:

*One cannot simply deny one's own potential.*

Chasing after my brother's shadow alone wasn't enough. I joined the student council and even gave a speech at the opening ceremony. I was walking on a path that even I found hard to believe.



I must also not forget the crucial role played by Ayanokoji-kun. Had he not been in my class, I surely wouldn't be the person I am today. Perhaps I would have remained even more immature, more awkward, and even less capable of connecting with others. Though at times his utterly baffling attitude left me confused, that oddity was, in its own way, part of his charm.

In any case, it was on that day that I resolved to truly set graduating from Class A as my goal. Not for my brother, nor just for myself. But for every one of us in Class A— with Ayanokoji-kun leading the way — to stand together through thick and thin. That is what Class A is all about.

*A destination that one can never reach alone.*

—However, we can't afford to let our guard down. Right now, all we've done is carve a path towards the summit. There is only one year left of our school life. Ryuen-kun's class is just behind us. Even though they are trailing by a margin, we still can't underestimate Ichinose-san's class or Sakayanagi-san's former class. No matter what methods they have to use in the future, they'll surely try to surpass us.

Conversely, if we want to completely leave them in the dust, we have to wage a battle they can't catch up with.

I sighed and averted my gaze from the sign. The joy ends here. I must regain my full concentration. With that thought, I opened the classroom door. Inside the classroom, the pre-arranged seating chart was projected onto the giant screen that replaced the blackboard.



“I’m sitting at—”

I’m in the second row from the corridor side, the fourth seat from the front. That was my seat on my first day in Class 3A. And right next to it— the fourth seat in the first row— was where Ayanokoji-kun’s name was written.

“Once again, I end up sitting next to him... huh?”

Although the seating arrangement has changed drastically, two years ago we were also neighbors like this. Even if we have to switch seats again soon, I don’t mind this kind of coincidence.

I sat back down at my seat, secretly amused by this small repetition. Perhaps because I arrived so early, Ayanokoji-kun hasn’t shown up yet. I can’t wait to see what he’ll think when he notices the seating chart.

Through the window in the distance, I gazed at the scene outside. Whether you’re a first-year or a second-year, the view always seems a little different. One year. In another year, my school life will come to an end. When that time comes, I want to graduate from Class A together with this class and these friends.

I won’t let everything remain just a dream.

I must— and will— definitely make this goal a reality.

# Chapter 1: Chaos

After the opening ceremony in the gym had ended, the students who just entered their third year returned to the classroom. A few minutes later, the bell signaled the start of the second period.

“That’s so strange...”

Horikita tilted her head and glanced down the corridor several times.

“What’s wrong? Is something bothering you?”

Sudo, sitting diagonally behind her, asked with slight concern.

“I haven't seen Ayanokoji-kun since the opening ceremony. And now it’s already class time.”

In the classroom, everyone was present except for Ayanokoji. Even if there were no classes afterward, attendance was mandatory at this time. Unexplained absences would surely be investigated by the school.

From past experience, Horikita understood that one absence wouldn’t cost the class much in the way of negative consequences, yet today was meant to be the first day of the third year, when the class should be full of energy.

Moreover, unlike Sudo and Ike— both of whom had been habitually late before— Ayanokoji didn't like to do things that would attract attention. That made Horikita all the more troubled by his absence.

“Yeah, but when we left the gym, he seemed perfectly normal...”



Sudo recalled what he observed less than half an hour ago, murmuring as he looked up at Horikita.

“Is that so?”

Horikita remembered that when she had chatted with Ayanokoji this morning about their soon-to-be neighboring seats, nothing had seemed out of the ordinary. He had been acting just like his usual self.

“Maybe he has a stomachache and is hiding in the restroom?”

“Well, that isn’t entirely impossible...”

Though Horikita felt a twinge of irritation at Sudo’s seemingly unsympathetic remark, she had to admit it was a possible explanation. However, Sudo felt something was odd. He seemed to remember something, crossing his hands and nodding deeply.

“Could it be that he’s faking being sick?”

After saying that, Sudo offered a faint smile, as if a realization had struck him, leading to an unexpected comment.

“Faking being sick? Why would you think that?”

Horikita asked. Sudo lowered his voice and explained his reasoning.

“He just broke up with Karuizawa recently. If he were to run into her, it’d be super awkward.”

“Faking illness just for that? But he seemed totally fine this morning.”

“Once school started, the emotional impact of a breakup might hit just as hard as a physical blow. You know I can relate to that— if I were heartbroken, I’d be completely devastated mentally.”

Sudo awkwardly looked away from Horikita, remembering his confession to her during last year's school trip. Horikita could imagine what that must have felt like for Sudo, and found the situation rather awkward.

“...Is that so?”

Even though Horikita didn’t really see herself as being in a superior position in matters of love, she understood that there was a distinct difference between the one being dumped and the one doing the dumping. For someone like Horikita— lacking both much experience and knowledge about romance— it wasn’t easy to fully express her understanding.

A complex look crossed her face, hinting at her inner thoughts. Sudo hastily scratched his head.

“Hey, I’m over it, but maybe Ayanokoji has a softer side that no one really sees. When classmates date, a breakup can really complicate things. Look— since this morning, even Karuizawa has been blatantly avoiding Ayanokoji.”

Up until the end of the third term (before spring break), the two used to be inseparable, practically immune to interference from outsiders. Horikita remembered those times clearly.



But this morning, the two hadn't moved closer at all. Not only on a physical level, but emotionally as well. When romance is involved, relationships inevitably get complicated.

“I get what you’re saying, but shouldn’t both people in a relationship be prepared for that possibility?”

Horikita wasn’t trying to disrupt the conversation about relationship dynamics. In truth, not every breakup happens peacefully. Both parties should be aware of the risks involved.

“No way— no one starts a relationship with the intention of breaking up. I also heard from one of the juniors that if a couple breaks up and can’t manage their distance properly, it really messes with your head.”

Horikita stole a quick glance at Karuizawa, who was sitting by the window at the back. Karuizawa looked listless, staring out the window.

“They should at least have this level of risk management...”

Even if what Sudo said was right, each scenario should be judged on its own. You cannot be absent or late just because you can't stand the unpleasant atmosphere.

“But... no matter how I analyze it, neither explanation really seems likely.”

Horikita concluded. Whether it was a stomachache or the shock of a breakup, neither possibility carried much weight. Earlier, Ayanokoji had seemed perfectly normal. Of course, it was possible he was just maintaining a poker face, skillfully concealing his true feelings. Yet

Horikita didn't think Ayanokoji was the type to hide something like that.

“Well, it's only a possibility. A slight lateness can probably be overlooked.”

“One instance is fine, but if it happens repeatedly, we can't just let it slide for the sake of the class. Anyway, we'll know soon enough.”

Regardless of the truth, at least Horikita believed that he wouldn't vanish from school without a reason.

That was her assessment.



## Part 1

Before long, the bell rang.

The first thing Horikita noticed was the panicked expression on the homeroom teacher, Chabashira's face. After glancing around the entire classroom, Chabashira's complexion suddenly turned pale.

Her unusual attitude made students around her worried. Her gaze was clearly unfocused. For several seconds, she said nothing, she simply stood at the podium, looking out at the whole classroom.

No— in truth, she wasn't really "seeing" anything at all. Her eyes were lifeless, almost empty. Even the most dense students in the class would sense something was wrong.

Horikita had wanted to ask about Ayanokoji, who still hadn't arrived, but the atmosphere made it hard to speak up. In any event, it seemed most important to first check on Chabashira's condition.

"Sensei, are you okay?"

Before Horikita could act, Hirata spoke up to check on her.

Chabashira gave no response to Hirata's inquiry. It was as if Hirata's voice hadn't reached her ears at all. The students who sat silently, watching their teacher, were growing uneasy over this abnormality.

"Um, Sensei..."

Kikuchi, seated at the very front near Chabashira, called out cautiously from a close distance. But Chabashira didn't reply, not

moving an inch. Kikuchi got up and waved her hand, trying to attract her attention.

It seemed that Chabashira finally came back to her senses and glanced at Kikuchi. But she immediately shifted her gaze over to Horikita's side.

Horikita somewhat sensed this, but in fact, they weren't making direct eye contact. Chabashira was just vaguely looking in Horikita's direction. Horikita deduced that Chabashira still hadn't been picking up the voices of the students led by Hirata.

If that were the case, then Chabashira really must not be feeling well. Although no abnormalities were noticed before the opening ceremony, they couldn't ignore the situation now. Chabashira might have fallen ill.

Just as Horikita pulled back her chair and stood up, ready to approach the podium, Chabashira murmured quietly.

“I... I'm fine.”

She sounded listless, as if her energy was drained. Had she been listening to students' voices all along or had they reached her just now?

“Even so, Sensei, it's clear that you're not in good shape.”

Hirata responded with relief while seeking reassurance on Chabashira's earlier demeanor.

“Um... no, my body is really fine. It's just...”



Chabashira rested her hand on the podium, as if gathering her thoughts to continue, then turned her gaze once again toward Horikita's side. Her eyes weren't fixed on Horikita herself, but rather on the only empty seat beside her— that of Ayanokoji.

“Has something happened to Ayanokoji-kun?”

If Ayanokoji had sustained a serious injury or fallen ill on his way back from the gym, then Chabashira's reaction would indeed be understandable.

At the same time, it meant that the suspicion— “Did something happen?” —was, to some extent, correct.

Horikita's question had indeed reached Chabashira's ears. That very fact made her prolonged silence all the more hinting of seriousness of the situation.

“Is he injured or sick?”

Horikita asked anxiously. In response, Chabashira merely shook her head slightly, indicating that Horikita's guess was wrong. If it weren't injury or illness, then it wouldn't be an emergency. So why was Chabashira's face so gloomy?

“Hey, hey, hey, what on earth is going on? What happened to Ayanokoji? Tell us now!”

Ike, not bothering to read the room, impatiently pressed her for a response due to Chabashira's unusual attitude. Chabashira glanced at Ike, then looked around the entire class. Her expression was indeed very serious, with no signs of reassurance.

“To be honest...”

Chabashira slightly opened her mouth, and just when everyone thought she would speak, she closed her eyes and mouth again. But perhaps realizing that staying silent wasn't helping, she raised her head.

“I have something important to announce to everyone... This morning — no, I believe, just a moment ago... one student used their private point privileges.”

Her words were a little unclear, yet Chabashira still managed to relay the fact to the class.

“What? I'm a bit confused— what do you mean he used his private points for something?”

A student... Private points privileges...

Even though she had explained, there was still a lot left uncertain, which only deepened everyone's confusion. Was it that the incident was caused by a troublesome matter in another class, making it difficult to elaborate further? Various speculations began to emerge in the students' minds.

“Yes... Ayanokoji, who is not in the classroom now... he used the privileges.”

Chabashira seriously conveyed this, but students tilted their heads, not understanding. They couldn't comprehend what privileges Ayanokoji had used.

“Tran— transfer classes...”

Just as someone was about to ask again, Chabashira continued, this time getting to the point.

Ayanokoji has transferred classes.

Chabashira definitely said transfer, but it seemed completely absurd. Transferring from Class A could only mean moving to a lower-ranked class. More fundamentally, the premise itself was problematic.

“Uh, Chabashira-sensei, this isn’t funny at all. Everyone’s taking this seriously.”

If transferring classes were as simple as just deciding to do so, no one would be going through all this hassle. For a student to transfer classes, one must pay 20 million private points. This is well known—practically a fairy tale.

So naturally, some students assumed that Chabashira was joking.

“I agree with Horikita. In fact, Sensei, are you really alright?”

Chabashira's statements were full of contradictions, making it impossible for everyone to sense any authenticity. Was it truly because she wasn’t feeling well? Or could it be...?

“Is there some kind of special exam about to start?”

Sudo, arms folded, almost simultaneously voiced his thoughts along with Horikita. Indeed, it seemed that a special test— one where we had to decipher clues hidden in every word and action of Chabashira



— was underway. Such a wild speculation actually seemed more realistic.

“I know no one can understand what I’m saying. But... it's true.”

“Even if you say it's true—”

“Take out your phones, the OAA will show it.”

Chabashira insisted that she wasn’t lying, lowering her gaze as she gave instructions to the class.

“This is going too far, even as a joke...”

Yet inside, Horikita felt a subtle unease. At this point, she was starting to have an ominous feeling.

Although most of the students expressed doubt over Chabashira’s announcement, they still followed her instructions and brought out their phones to open the Class 3A info sheet on the OAA system.

That list was meant to include the details of all 37 students in the class. If everything were in order, Ayanokoji’s information should appear there— proof that nothing had occurred.

But...

Horikita was convinced she must have missed it. She scrolled up and down several times, yet Ayanokoji’s name was nowhere to be seen. It was as if he had never existed from the start— vanished from the entire list. Horikita had seen similar OAA updates several times before: when Kohei Katsuragi transferred classes, or when there were dropouts.

“Moments ago, Ayanokoji’s info was updated... It looks like he’s already transferred.”

“You... you’re saying what, sensei? That can’t possibly be happening... can it?”

Horikita’s voice began to tremble almost unconsciously.

“Effective today... it’s been finalized that Ayanokoji has transferred from this class to Class C.”

Chabashira clarified, turning her previously vague words into a definitive statement. Ayanokoji hadn’t shown up since the opening ceremony because he had left this class.

“...Eh?”

While Chabashira’s meaning was crystal clear, Horikita’s body reacted in ways she couldn’t comprehend.

“What are you saying... that Ayanokoji-kun transferred to Class C...”

“That’s utter nonsense—not funny at all, sensei. And it’s not April Fools’ Day!”

Most students remained half in disbelief and half convinced that it was a lie, questioning the announcement under the presumption it was a joke.

“I... don’t like this kind of joke either.”

*Ba-dump, Ba-dump, Ba-dump...*

"Today, there's really something off about Chabashira-sensei."

*Ba-dump, Ba-dump, Ba-dump, Ba-dump—*

*Stop!*

Echoed in Horikita's mind. Why was her heart pounding so fiercely?

She understood, yet didn't want to fully accept the reality. Thrown into confusion by Chabashira-sensei's bad joke.

"I understand how hard it is for everyone to believe this— I feel the same. But... there's no doubt about it, it's true."

*Ba-dump, Ba-dump, Ba-dump, Ba-dump, Ba-dump—*

"It can't be... There must be some kind of mistake."

Horikita answered while rechecking the OAA for Class 3C. If he had transferred, Ayanokoji must be in Class C. This absolutely couldn't be happening.

Horikita thought this, but Ayanokoji's name was indeed displayed on the OAA. Confronted with this unexplainable reality, Horikita's mind went blank.

"It's a lie, it can't be true, sensei— Ayanokoji-kun transferring to Class C..."





Matsushita was visibly flustered. Some students couldn't hide their surprise at how different her words and behavior were from her usual self.

“This... is the truth. There's no mistake... absolutely... no mistake.”

Chabashira repeatedly stared at the tablet in confirmation. At this point, it wouldn't be surprising if the school issued an official notice.

*Horikita wanted to stop time.*

*She couldn't understand.*

*Ayanokoji transferring classes.*

No matter how much she thought, she couldn't comprehend it. It made no sense.

*An impossible event.*

Horikita and the others had desperately climbed up from Class D. And finally reached Class A. In the coming year, everyone would unite to defend this position. It should have been like this. Transferring to Class C offered no benefits.

“B-but what about the private points? Even 20 million— isn't that a fortune, no matter how much he has?”

“We still don't know all the details, but since the school officially approved it, one thing's for sure: he managed to come up with that sum.”

“Huh? If that's really true, then Ayanokoji... wait, why?”

“No, this makes zero sense, right? We finally clawed our way to Class A, yeah? And he chooses to transfer to declining Class C on our very first day in A Class? To the class Sakayanagi left behind, of all places?”

“What's Ayanokoji thinking...? I don't get it. Akito, did you hear anything beforehand?”

“Not at all... We haven't been that close recently. If Horikita and the others didn't know, then no one does, probably.”

It becomes clear that even Yukimura and Miyake, members of Ayanokoji's closer group, were also completely in the dark about this transfer.

“Could it be...? Did Karuizawa dump him, and he's too embarrassed to stay in class?”

“No way. Even if he felt embarrassed, he wouldn't suddenly have the money for a transfer.”

“Maybe he begged someone and got a loan...? No, that seems really unlikely.”

“Does that mean he betrayed us?”

“But think about it— he didn't move up to a better class; he dropped down, right? That's just not normal. With Sakayanagi gone, it isn't like he's hopping on a winning horse either. And it's not like what happened with Katsuragi, who ended up with nowhere to belong and got kicked out.”

Hondo responded to Shinohara's puzzled murmur with a similar sense of bafflement. They were oblivious to something unimaginable. Or rather, most students were likely not even considering it.

The fact that Ayanokoji was a powerhouse capable of single-handedly swaying class battles.

Sure, one might think he's just trying to take the easy way out.

However, realistically, if he wanted an easy life, staying in this class and doing nothing would be far more strategically sound than transferring to a Class C that had sunk after Sakayanagi's departure.

"I don't get it. Sure, voluntarily dropping to a lower class is a weird story, but I suspect private points might be involved. I mean, if he's getting not just the transfer money but even a year's living expenses in return—"

"That's even weirder, though! That would mean they're basically replacing Sakayanagi, or in other words, that class is willing to pay a fortune just to recruit someone who can help them win in A Class from now on, right? Why would that be Ayanokoji? Sure, he's been showing off a bit lately, but still..."

At that, Horikita gasped. Even without understanding Ayanokoji's intentions, Horikita couldn't shake the idea that Sakayanagi's former class had made a move to snatch Ayanokoji.

In fact, to turn things around from here, it might even be the most correct choice for them. Even so, the question arose: Would Ayanokoji actually agree to such an offer?

“That's... possible.”

Kushida said in a composed voice amidst everyone's shock and confusion.

“Yeah, but hold on—”

“Well, even if this is true... it doesn't feel like that big of a deal, does it? It's not like Horikita or Hirata transferred.”

“Kanji... Ayanokoji leaving isn't some simple matter.”

“Even if you say it's not simple... even if Ayanokoji-kun is gone, it's not that big of a deal—”

Some students didn't see this transfer as a particularly serious issue. Kushida cast a gaze of exasperation at them.

“I hate to break it to you, but Ayanokoji-kun is far more important than you think, Ike-kun and Shinohara-san.”

“Important, you say... but how?”

“It's just not been obvious, but he's undoubtedly been contributing to the class in countless unseen ways all this time. Right? Horikita-san?”

Horikita nodded as she received the remark from the composed Kushida, even in this tense situation.

“...Yes. Regardless of Ayanokoji-kun's own intentions, he's undeniably the ideal choice for Class C to recruit and turn the tables. If he was really someone we could afford to lose, would Chabashira-sensei be acting like this?”



Chabashira remained in a daze, more lost in her own thoughts than listening to the students' words. Shinohara and Hondo glanced at Chabashira.

“Seriously, is it that big of a deal?”

“As Horikita says, Ayanokoji's presence is significant. If he hadn't been in our class, we almost certainly wouldn't be in A Class right now. Of course, that's not the only reason we reached A Class... but still... The hole he leaves is bigger than you can imagine... But then, why...?”

Teacher and students alike, no one had an answer. If there was anyone in this situation who could understand everything— Naturally, not just Horikita, but many students' gazes turned towards Karuizawa, who hadn't uttered a single word.

If anyone knew, it would be Karuizawa, who had spent more time by his side as his girlfriend, perhaps... That thought likely crossed everyone's mind.

“Karuizawa-san, did he say anything to you?”

“...No idea.”

Karuizawa answered flatly, without even looking their way.

“I don't know anything. It's not like I'm hiding something, I truly don't know.”

*Her downcast expression wasn't just because Ayanokoji had transferred— but likely because she believed it was caused by her ending their relationship as his girlfriend.*

No, Horikita shook that thought away. This was no time for such things if Ayanokoji had truly transferred classes, there were far more pressing issues at hand.

“If this transfer is some kind of mistake, is it possible to cancel it?”

“If it were ruled an illegal transfer, then cancellation might be an option. But in that case, whoever committed the foul play would face severe punishment. Ayanokoji wouldn't be spared either.”

An illegal transfer initiated by Ayanokoji. A possibility she didn't even want to consider.

“But the possibility of illegality is low. Given that the school has officially accepted it...”

“Even so, even if that's the case, we can't be sure, can we? What if some unexpected factor— like being threatened— comes to light later on?”

Otherwise, Horikita couldn't explain it. A transfer to another class without a single hint— that shouldn't be possible.

“No, that's—”

“Horikita-san” Hirata's calm voice reached the agitated Horikita.

“I think we should start by accepting reality first.”

“Reality... what do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. He, Ayanokoji-kun, has transferred classes. This exists as an undeniable fact. The school has already accepted it, and his absence here is proof.”

“But that's... that's not proof. He might just be feeling unwell, or it could be some kind of mistake—”

“As Sensei explained, Ayanokoji-kun's transfer is confirmed on the OAA as well. No matter how much we don't want to believe it, we have to start by accepting it.”

Horikita, speechless in response, watched Hirata calmly continue talking. Seeing this, Kushida showed a hint of interest.

“You're surprisingly composed, Hirata-kun. Even if it's a transfer or expulsion, a student might have just vanished from our class, and you're not even shaken?”

Up until now, Hirata had always felt deep pain whenever a student seemed on the verge of dropping out. And even after they were gone, he worried about their well-being more than anyone.

“Transfer and expulsion are similar but fundamentally different. Especially if it's the person's own choice. Besides, there's no use panicking. Even if we make a fuss, it's not like Ayanokoji-kun will magically reappear.”

“That’s not quite right, is it? Horikita-san hasn't completely ruled out a mistake. Shouldn't you be supporting that possibility, like the usual Hirata-kun?”

While some in the class were showing composure, Hirata was the most prominent among them. His uncharacteristic behavior of staying quiet and observing the class's reaction for a while was also unusual.

“In short, what exactly are you getting at, Kushida?”

Sudo asked, pulling back his chair and standing up. He suspiciously assumed that Kushida was, once again, trying to throw the class into chaos.

“I'm saying, without understanding anything, discussing it during homeroom won't lead to any clear direction. Right, Chabashira-sensei?”

Kushida nodded demonstrably and turned her gaze towards the hallway. Had other classes already finished homeroom? The hallway was starting to get noisy.

“...Yes, you're right.”

Because the classroom had high soundproofing, normal speaking voices wouldn't reach the hallway outside. However, if someone were to get close to the wall or the door, bits of conversation might be picked up—and there might be some students with less-than-noble intentions eavesdropping out there.

Sudo nodded once, as if impressed, and sat back down.

“I'm ending the homeroom here. However, I don't want anyone taking actions that feel like cornering Ayanokoji. Right now, he hasn't done anything that breaks the rules, understand?”



Though harboring numerous doubts just like the students, as their teacher, Chabashira needed to instruct them to refrain from problematic behavior. As an adult, she couldn't forget to issue necessary warnings.

“I... also agree with Chabashira-sensei. Beyond just the rules, without knowing the full situation, rushing to his side in a large group will only make trouble more likely. I'll try to confirm things first, so until then, please act calmly.”

“Exactly. Not just unnecessary contact with Ayanokoji, but also be absolutely sure to avoid conflicts with other classes. If anything happens, always go through me or the school, got it?”

Realizing that there was no point in continuing to be silent with the students, Chabashira placed her hands firmly on the podium, as if to brace herself as a teacher.

## Chapter 2: Confirmation

Since full classes will start from tomorrow, the first day of the new school year was coming to an end around 11:30 AM.

No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say it had ended without anyone noticing.

The unbelievable story of Ayanokoji-kun transferring.

It was hard to believe at first, and even now, I still didn't truly believe it.

*It couldn't be true.*

*It couldn't be true...*

I kept repeating the same words in my heart, like a spell.

But...

But... this wasn't a misunderstanding, nor a dream.

It was truly happening as reality, in real-time...

*I want to see him.*

*I don't want to see him.*

Honestly, there's a part of me that's scared to meet him. No, that's not just a little fear—it's overwhelming. So overwhelming, I couldn't bear it.

While my inner chaos continued, I looked at my own hands, at my palms. They were trembling. Just imagining it made my body tremble. I was trying to abandon the thought, to reject it. But... but even so—I had to confirm Ayanokoji-kun's true intentions. Giving up was not an option.

His purpose, his own words, hadn't been directly stated yet. There's still time to judge everything after I've confirmed the truth. He might be carrying something he couldn't tell us.

—Let's confirm it.

Relying solely on that resolve, I stood up from my seat.

“—Horikita-san.”

Hirata-kun, who had been waiting for me to move, suddenly came up beside me. Sudo and some of the other students were watching us.

“I'm sorry, but can it wait? I'm going to see him now.”

I'm not in a state to engage in any extra small talk at the moment.

Without even grabbing my bag, I step out into the corridor with only my phone in hand.

Ever since the final bell rang, quite some time has passed. As soon as I step into the hallway, I notice many students have already begun heading home.

Looking around, I immediately sense an unusual atmosphere among the students from other classes. Whether or not teachers in each class made an announcement, it seems that by now every student in the

same grade has heard the news about Ayanokoji's transfer. The curious stares directed toward me say it all. Of course, those stares surely carry all sorts of meanings and assumptions— maybe there's a theory that he was sent as a spy to the opposing class or that he was expelled from our class or that he betrayed us. Countless baseless speculations might be flying around. But none of that matters now.

Before we can even begin to understand anyone else's thoughts, we still don't know what our class— or Ayanokoji himself— is really thinking.

Without any courtesy, I pushed open the door to the classroom of the former Sakayanagi class. If only he was still there...

I thought that, but...

While searching for his figure, I unconsciously counted the number of desks. Even though Sakayanagi was supposed to have left on her own accord, the number of seats hasn't been reduced.

And yet, despite that, inside the classroom only a handful of students — boys and girls— remain, and there's no sign of Ayanokoji.

“Tsukasaki-kun”

I called out to Tsukasaki-kun, the one student who was closest to me.

“You need something from me?”

“You know why I'm here, right? Where's Ayanokoji?”

“He left the classroom a few minutes ago. I'm guessing he went to Keyaki Mall.”



“I see... thank you.”

If that’s the case, then I have no business here any longer.

Returning to the hallway, the smirking expressions from some students immediately jumped into view. It’s irritating to know that while we’re in the midst of trouble, they find it amusing.

Picking up my pace, I tried calling Ayanokoji on my phone. The phone rang, but no matter how long I waited, there was no sign of him answering.

*Was he not noticing, or was he noticing and choosing not to answer?*

“Horikita-san.”

Matsushita-san was the one who called out to me as I was heading towards the shoe lockers.

“Sorry, but I’m in a hurry right now.”

“I know. You’re going to meet Ayanokoji-kun, right? Let me come with you.”

Matsushita-san started walking beside me, matching my pace without stopping.

“What are you...?”

“...I want to know the reason for Ayanokoji-kun's transfer. Just to double-check, this isn't part of your strategy, is it, Horikita-san?”

“Unfortunately, I have no such plan. If we were transferring him to Ryuen-kun's class, it might make sense as a strategy, but there's almost no point in dropping him to Class C. Now that Sakayanagi-san is gone, there's no reason to join that class.”

“...Right, I thought so. So, Ayanokoji-kun decided on the transfer without telling anyone, huh.”

“I don't know. Was he asked by someone, or perhaps threatened—”

*Could it be that he was swayed by a large sum of money...?*

I let a few wild thoughts race through my head, only to quickly dismiss them.

At the very least, he wouldn't be one to fall for money, and someone of his caliber wouldn't transfer just because he was threatened. It's a truth I would rather not face.

In other words, the worst-case scenario is that this transfer was something Ayanokoji-kun thought about and decided on individually.

“Right now... I don't want to speculate. Let's not discuss this until we hear directly from him. So, please wait—”

“I'd like that too—I want to hear his explanation with my own ears. He must have some reason that will finally make sense to us.”

Yes, exactly. I, too, wanted to know an answer that I could accept. He doesn't say much to me, no—he keeps many things to himself in front of everyone. Because of that, people sometimes mistake him for being incompetent or even hold a grudge against him. But in reality, it's not

so. Even though he may seem reluctant, he does care about our class and does offer his help. Surely, there's some intent he hasn't revealed. Perhaps he sensed something amiss or even danger in the former Sakayanagi class. Or maybe... he was threatened by someone powerful. That might explain why he went alone, not confiding in any allies. It's almost like the actions of a movie hero. And yes, I secretly hope for that to be the case— but it's not the only thing that matters.

I wish he had consulted with us. No matter what reason he had for deciding to transfer, leaving the class without a word... such a thing... such a thing... that just isn't acceptable.

“Ayanokoji-kun... why...”

—*Am I... that unreliable?*

“...How stupid...”

*Yes, that's it.*

Even when I ask myself these questions, I can't help but let out a bitter laugh.

To him, I suppose I'm still just a child— a person unworthy of standing by his side.

I'm not someone he should depend on.

“—Horikita-san, are you alright?”

“I... I'm fine.”

Perhaps my unspoken worries reached Matsushita-san, because she's looking at me with concern.

“More importantly, it's about Ayanokoji-kun.”

The class transfer was already officially decided.

Yet there remains a very real possibility that this wasn't his genuine decision.

If so, then we absolutely must save him.

Not just me, but the whole class must pool together our private points for his sake.

## Part 1

I had arrived at Keyaki Mall based on what Tsukasaki-kun had told me.

Following the information I got from randomly stopping a student, I made my way to a cafe. If the information was correct, Ayanokoji-kun should be here...

*What kind of face is he making now?*

*What kind of expression is he wearing now?*

*And, what is he thinking?*

Trying to suppress my impatient feelings, we reached the location.

Tucked away in a corner of the cafe, I spotted Ayanokoji-kun alongside Hashimoto-kun and Morishita from C-Class and Ichinose from D-Class.

“There he is...”

“Yes...”

He looked just as usual, like he was simply having a normal conversation with those around him— as if nothing unusual had happened.

“He doesn’t seem at all bothered about transferring...”

*An event that happened just an hour ago.*



He treated it as if it were something already in the past...

“Anyway, let’s talk. Let’s start by just talking— Everything else comes after that.”

At this stage, we shouldn't jump to any conclusions.

*We shouldn't jump to conclusions just yet.*

Ignoring my heavy footsteps, I steeled myself and moved forward. Just as I drew near enough for a conversation, Hashimoto-kun noticed me and quickly rose from his seat.

“Yo, Horikita. We're in the middle of a little strategy meeting here, you got any business with us?”

I was fully prepared for him to act like we were intruders. Such an attitude and response were completely expected. But right now, the only person I wanted to talk to was Ayanokoji-kun.

“I want to talk to Ayanokoji-kun.”

“If you want to talk to our leader candidate, you'll have to go through me first.”

“Candidate... Leader candidate? That's quite a sudden development.”

“Not at all, I’ve been waiting for this moment all along. Right, Ayanokoji?”

Hashimoto-kun grinned as he sought agreement from him.

I wished he would cut short that trivial exchange.

My eyes, however, would not meet Ayanokoji-kun's as he turned to face us. I wasn't sure I had the strength to brace myself for what he might say next...

"I won't deny it, but with Sakayanagi still around, that possibility was out of the question."

I didn't want to hear that, yet I forced myself to continue.

"Then what exactly are you planning? What's the point of transferring classes like that?"

"Don't just start talking without permission, you know."

"I'm sorry, but I need you to be quiet right now. As class leader, I need to grasp the current situation."

"I see, as class leader, huh. Well, it's true a classmate suddenly left. Natural enough, but that's exactly why we can't let you just confirm things. Your trouble is to our advantage."

Hashimoto-kun grinned, his thinking was logically sound.

Certainly, turning away the intruders, me, would undoubtedly be beneficial for Class C.

"Don't glare at me like that. By the way, Matsushita is accompanying you to this important scene, that's...?"

Hashimoto-kun, noticing the strange combination, questioned it.

He was usually a cautious and observant person, and he was indeed poking at a sensitive point. He shouldn't care who was accompanying

me, but he pretended to care and tried to stir things up.

What answer would satisfy him? Just as I was trying to think of a response, Matsushita-san stepped forward to stand beside me.

“I’m just here in a supporting capacity, I’m here merely as a regular classmate to report what I see and hear. Horikita, you seem quite attached to Ayanokoji, but honestly, from my perspective it isn’t such a big issue.”

As if willingly playing the villain, Matsushita-san answered.

Accepting her words gratefully, I nodded slightly.

“That makes sense, To many, this abrupt transfer appears all the more strange. There’s no reason for someone like Ayanokoji to drop down to a lower class— and besides, who would voluntarily choose a student like him?”

Few outside of those of us like Sudo and myself truly grasp the extent of Ayanokoji Kiyotaka’s talent. Even Matsushita-san, despite her own abilities, is likely no exception.

Having taken in our presence for a moment, Ayanokoji’s eyes shifted back to Hashimoto-kun, who was trying to reseat himself.

“What Matsushita just said about her being ‘just a support’ is nothing more than a cover.”

“—A cover? But Horikita seemed to accept it rather calmly.”

“A difference in perspective. To Horikita, Matsushita might simply be another classmate. But in reality, she’s quite the schemer— someone

who values my abilities as much as, if not more than, Horikita does.”

At his words, I glanced at Matsushita-san. Though she tried to remain composed, a trace of agitation showed.

She knew Ayanokoji-kun's abilities more deeply and from earlier than I imagined...? Ayanokoji-kun's tone implied that...

“She probably thought she couldn't leave this matter to Horikita alone. That's why she came to see me with her own eyes, to confirm the reason for the transfer, my true intentions. Looking at the OAA or daily life, Matsushita might seem like just another model student, but in reality, she's quite sharp, even among Horikita's class. She's the type who usually doesn't go all out and prefers to work behind the scenes. In fact, in this situation, it's better to assume that Matsushita is analyzing the situation more calmly than Horikita.”

“Oh dear, Ayanokoji-kun,” Matsushita-san tried to refute, “you really think so highly of me?”

Ayanokoji-kun continued, without pausing.

“Not at all, In the past, whenever I asked for help, you've consistently laid the groundwork effectively from behind the scenes. Remember when Maezono dropped out? You were the one who stepped in. I am simply giving you the credit you deserve.”

Even as he spoke, I saw that Matsushita-san could no longer hide her unease. The cooperative relationship between Ayanokoji-kun and Matsushita-san, which had been going on without my knowledge. It was casually exposed in front of students from another class. To

emphasize that he was no longer an ally... No, perhaps for him, this wasn't even considered an exposure.

Ichinose-san, who had been listening to this conversation with interest, rested her chin on her hand and smiled.

“I didn't know you were such a reliable person. I guess I still don't understand some students properly. From now on, I'll have to pay close attention to Matsushita-san too.”

It felt like the ground was swaying and trembling, and I was about to lose my sense of balance. Thoughts I would never have entertained before. This place had become a completely alien territory, attacking me and Matsushita-san.

“There's no point in searching for the reason for the transfer. The fact that I didn't tell Horikita or Matsushita— no, anyone in the class, about this is everything. As you can see, Hashimoto and Morishita, and Ichinose too, aren't surprised by my transfer. You understand what I'm implying with this difference, right?”

“That's... maybe you only told them after you met up at the cafe...”

“Then go back to Class C, or catch one of their classmates and ask them. They should tell you when they learned about the transfer.”

I was at a loss for words to reply. The words I intended to speak stopped somewhere in my throat.

“It's scary when a student leaves your class, isn't it, Horikita? We also had some information leak to Ryuen when Katsuragi left, but even then, he was kind of an outsider in our class... no, he was kept afloat



by Sakayanagi, so he didn't have much of this kind of inside information. But Ayanokoji is different, right? He was central to your class, so not just about Matsushita, but if you dig, all sorts of inside stories are likely to come out.”

Hashimoto-kun, sounding amused, lightly tapped the table.

“Well then, Horikita, how about you tell us your business already? We're busy with our meeting, you see.”

“Business or not... I, that is... I want to talk to Ayanokoji-kun. If possible, just the three of us.”

“As you can see, I'm in a meeting with Hashimoto and the others right now. Talk here now.”

“...It's something difficult to talk about here. If you're busy, then, well, tonight, or tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow—”

“Sorry, but my schedule is packed for a while after this.”

No matter how harshly I was rejected, I had to keep acting strong. There were many students in the cafe, including some of my classmates. If I were to lose my composure carelessly here, it would affect the future direction of Class A.

“Then, I'll talk here. ...You understand, don't you? I came here because I want to hear your true intentions.”

“About transferring classes, you absolutely want to know the reason?”

“Yes. What are you thinking, doing something like this...?”

*Is it because of me?*

*Or, was there some event that changed your heart?*

*These Voiceless words.*

I desperately tried to keep the scream in my heart from becoming reality.

“I'm sorry, but I'm not in the mood to answer. But one thing is certain, the fact that I moved from Class A to Class C is real, not a dream or illusion.”

Saying that, the gaze that had been on me was averted. Even though he said he would listen, it was a rough response, practically being turned away at the door.

“Unfortunately, I have nothing more to say.”

“You're okay with not saying anything? Ayanokoji-kun, you'll be treated as a traitor, you know?”

Matsushita-san tried to push back, saying those words.

“Isn't that almost the case?”

The person in front of me didn't care how he was seen by others. He wasn't thinking about things in terms of resolve or lack thereof, or anything like that—he simply acted, on a different level entirely.

“...I see.”

Staying here any longer wouldn't yield any results. It was clear that it would only expose my own pathetic state.

No... from the beginning, I knew it would turn out like this. That's why, if I was worried about being seen, I could have arranged to meet at the dorm or at a later time. There were ways to avoid this. Knowing that, I just couldn't control myself.

“Let's go, Matsushita-san. I understand clearly now—he has become an enemy. It's so obvious that there's no need to bother with him anymore.”

Turning my back to him, I started walking again. But, I don't think any clear emotion remained here.

All that remained was a kind of headache, a sensation of dizziness, and a nameless, lingering nausea clinging to every step.

## Chapter 3: The Final Year Begins

Not long ago, right after the entrance ceremony...

I didn't return directly to the Class A classroom from the gymnasium, instead, I headed for the staff office. However, since the teachers were still in a meeting, I changed direction and went to see the director. He seemed a bit surprised to see me but probably had already heard from that man, so he didn't question me much. After confirming that I had 20 million points in hand and verifying where they came from, a series of tedious procedures began.

Mashima-sensei, who learned the news before homeroom, probably needed a bit of time to fully understand and process it. Still looking somewhat puzzled, Mashima-sensei cleared his throat and turned his gaze toward me.

"First, how about introducing yourself?"

Of course, I'm not a new student. In all my time here, even if we weren't in the same class, I remembered every student's face and name. Likewise, the students of Class C definitely knew who I was. However, we still had to go through this formality.

"The entrance ceremony just ended, so sorry to take up your time. I'm Kiyotaka Ayanokoji, and I just transferred to this class by spending 20 million private points. I can't replace Sakayanagi, who dropped out on her own. But if everyone here still has the will to fight, I believe I can help turn things around for a class that's fallen so far behind."

Brief yet comprehensive. I chose my words while reflecting on my botched self-introduction back in first year. I felt it was at least good enough, but I wasn't sure if my intentions truly got across.

Everyone stayed silent, simply staring at me. At that point, one student started clapping and broke the tension.

“Welcome, welcome, Ayanokoji.”

The one applauding was Hashimoto Masayoshi, my biggest sponsor in transferring to Class C. After Hashimoto broke the silence, a few more hands joined in, albeit halfheartedly.

It seemed not everyone was happy about my arrival. Plenty of the looks aimed my way were far from friendly. Most were cold and clearly not welcoming. Still, I couldn't judge this class too quickly based on that alone. Without Sakayanagi, the class had lost its sense of direction. People they didn't trust at all were showing up, and they had to decide on their own whether to rely on them. This class, which has lost its ambition, was now showing who it really was through its actions: wary, skeptical, yet also pressed for quick, positive results.

Unaware of these hidden tensions among the students, Mashima-sensei carried on with homeroom in an attempt to break the awkward atmosphere.

“Well then, about Ayanokoji's seat... let me think...”

Still looking unsure, Mashima-sensei glanced around the classroom. Excluding me, there were 36 students present, leaving four possible seats open. Maybe the fourth row, which had the fewest people, would



be the best choice— or perhaps we should consider moving another student’s seat for now?

Before Mashima-sensei could make a decision, the girl in the last seat by the window raised her hand.

“I think he should sit right in front of me.”

This only deepened the confusion on Mashima-sensei’s face, maybe because he hadn’t expected anyone to speak up, or especially not this particular student.

“In front of Morishita...?”

Indeed, the one who’d spoken was Morishita Ai, often called the class weirdo.

“Yes. As for why— first, since Ayanokoji Kiyotaka has just transferred to our class, he’s bound to feel uneasy. If you plop him in the middle of the room, he’ll probably just clam up like some gloomy introvert. So let’s give him that prime spot everyone envies (especially introverts): the last row by the window, where he can be at ease. Also, although it was only recently, I think we need to keep an eye on this ‘foreigner’ from a rival class. Considering all that, him sitting in front of me is the best option. If anyone objects, please speak now.”

Though Morishita’s words were high-handed and full of bias, no one in the class spoke up.

In any case, where I sat wasn’t really a big deal to me. If neither the homeroom teacher nor the others had objections, I had no reason to refuse.

But there was still one more issue left to resolve.

*Would the student sitting in front of Morishita accept this proposal?*

“Sugio, if you have no objections—”

Mashima-sensei was about to confirm how the current occupant, Sugio, felt when—

“Of course I don’t mind. In fact, let’s swap right now.”

Before Mashima-sensei could finish speaking, Sugio agreed to change seats.

He looked genuinely happy, as if the idea of moving seats delighted him.

“I see. Then, Sugio, please move to one of the open seats.”

“Got it!”

With that response, Sugio quickly gathered his belongings and stood up. Once Sugio gave his approval, Mashima-sensei brought the new desk and chair over.

“Take your seat, Ayanokoji. Let’s keep the homeroom moving.”

“All right.”

Following Morishita’s suggestion, I sat down in front of her.

No sooner had I taken my seat than I heard her voice from behind me.

“Nice to meet you, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.”

“Yeah, likewise.”

Class C was still tense overall, but compared to Horikita’s class that I was used to, it felt calmer in its own way. Although they had been notified in advance, some students might not have believed it would actually happen. Their fundamental discipline, however, remains high. For now, this environment works well for taking swift action and skipping the usual adjustments.

I’ve already checked the OAA to memorize everyone’s faces, names, and outwardly displayed abilities. But just like how my full abilities aren’t captured by the school’s measurements alone, each student has their own untapped potential, too.

Bringing such hidden abilities to light should be a priority in this new school life we have left.

There’s only one year remaining, so there’s no time to waste. Still, that doesn’t mean I can just rush in and try to close the distance between myself and the others right away. I need to find the right balance between the two approaches.

“What are you thinking about, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka?”

Morishita’s voice came from behind, like a whisper.

“I was thinking about the future.”

“Like, whether you can make a hundred new friends?”

For some reason, she said that with a certain sing-song rhythm.

While getting to know everyone in the class by making friends isn't a bad idea, it's not exactly what I had in mind.

“Not... quite.”

Her suggestion was pretty far from my actual thoughts, so I denied it.

“How about eating rice balls together with a hundred people?”

“No... I have no idea what you mean by that. Eating rice balls together with a hundred people?”

And that strange, rhythmic tone was still going strong.

“Look this way.”

When I turned around as I was told, I saw Morishita staring at me with cold eyes.

“You're unexpectedly clueless, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.”

“That's a little harsh.”

Gather a hundred friends to eat rice balls together? It sounds unrealistic.

“You seriously don't know those classic lines? Are you for real?”

“Nobody else would get it, either.”

*[TL Note: The two lines Morishita is quoting come from a Japanese children's song called “一年生になったら (When I Become a First-Grader).” That's why she was sounding so rhythmic.]*

After I answered, Morishita let out a long, exasperated sigh.

“‘Clueless’ might not be the right word; maybe I should say ‘ignorant of common things.’ That’s more accurate.”

She looked really disappointed, though I couldn’t tell what exactly let her down.

*A hundred friends? A hundred people eating rice balls together?*

Even after thinking it through, I still didn’t get it.

“Whatever. Face forward and listen to the teacher.”

But you’re the one who made me turn around...

## Part 1

Mashima-sensei finished explaining the upcoming course schedule and lesson contents for the next few days, then prepared to wrap up the homeroom session.

In terms of time management, third-year students can no longer afford to be as carefree as they were in first or second year. This period is a major crossroads in life, and by summer, they'll have to settle on their plans for the future while continuing through the remaining school year. However, this has nothing to do with students whose futures are already decided, or those like me who will have a path forward even if they do nothing.

“If there are no issues, then this homeroom is—”

With that, Mashima-sensei ended the session.

Because I suddenly transferred into 3rd Year Class C, the aftermath might make Horikita, or even all of Class A, to come looking for me. Still, there's no need to rush off in a panic. Even if I do leave right away, It is inevitable that they'll keep pressing me for answers.

If it causes a commotion here and now, it might lead to unnecessary trouble.

Ideally, I'd switch locations.

Besides, I have an appointment with someone afterward.

Just as homeroom ended and I was about to stand up, Hashimoto practically sprang out of his seat and addressed the class:



“Well then, let’s skip the chit-chat. How about we throw a welcome party for Ayanokoji at the Keyaki Mall? Let’s make it a grand one.”

Right after he said that, the atmosphere in the class grew tense.

So as not to draw attention, I quietly settled back into my seat. Mashima-sensei, who was about to walk out, also stopped and turned around to see how the students would react.

For several seconds, nobody said a word.

At last, Yoshida broke the silence.

“Sorry, but I object.”

He flatly refused in a calm, emotionless tone.

“Hey now, why say something like that?”

Having his proposal shot down, Hashimoto slumped his shoulders dramatically.

“Ayanokoji just arrived. If we act like he’s not a real classmate yet and leave him isolated, it’ll hurt his feelings. Show a little compassion, yeah?”

*Is this what it means to be “isolated”...?*

In any case, I tried to imagine how it would feel to be left out.

...Hmm. It certainly doesn’t feel great...

But at this point, it’s not even about whether they welcome me, the class atmosphere is going south because I became the topic of

discussion.

Some things you just can't ignore as a bystander, it's making the environment uneasy.

I'm not ready to have a welcome party when I haven't built any real connections yet, but since Hashimoto already suggested it, I can only watch quietly from the sidelines. Given my position, I can't exactly say, "Everyone, please come!" or "I refuse." From my perspective, it'd be better if things stayed as they were... But since Hashimoto is acting for my sake, I can't really blame him either.

"I'm not denying Ayanokoji at all. We all resolved ourselves to accept him by pooling our private points so he could join. But you know as well as I do that this isn't exactly the time for a joyful celebration, right? We've dropped to Class C. We can't afford to fall behind in any future special exams. What's really important now is for Ayanokoji to produce results that help this class—to prove he's a capable ally, right? Once he does that, we'll be glad to welcome him without you telling us to."

Having stated his reason for refusing, Yoshida rose from his seat.

"I agree, He hasn't shown us anything yet, and there's still a chance he's a spy from another class. I'm not in the mood to pretend like everything's fine and throw a party."

With that, Machida finished, and one by one, students from Class C slowly exited the room.

"Give me a break... What a headache."

Hashimoto muttered, scratching his head as he glanced apologetically my way. I gestured that I wasn't bothered by it.

In no time, only a handful of us remained. I'd been their opponent until now, so I'd hardly dealt with these students before. Among those still in the classroom were Hashimoto, Morishita, Yamamura, and Sanada— people I had at least a bit of a connection with. In other words, besides them, no one else stayed.

“You're really not wanted, huh, Kiyotaka Ayanokoji? Like a product nobody wants to buy.”

“Well, not being wanted is to be expected.”

“Maybe, but if someone like Honami Ichinose, Kikyo Kushida, or Yosuke Hirata transferred in, would they be treated the same way?”

“Um...”

I tried picturing the scene with the students she just listed. Just thinking about it, a vivid image formed in my mind.

“Maybe not everyone would, but you can be sure some of them would welcome those people with big smiles.”

“...Yeah... I guess so.”

“Don't give me that 'I guess so'— it's obviously true. Don't try to give yourself an out.”

The small, possibly unrealistic hope I'd been clinging to was shattered by Morishita's pointed remark.

“So, yeah. It’s pretty much a done deal that nobody wants you here, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.”

Her sharp observation left me with nothing to deny.

“Start by accepting reality.”

“That’s... fair.”

For some reason, it made me feel a faint sense of sadness.

While her words still echoed in my ears, Yamamura and Sanada excused themselves with apologetic faces and walked out.

Hashimoto watched them leave, then came over and patted my right shoulder.

“Sorry about that, Ayanokoji. We’re a bit short on people, but let’s still have the welcome party.”

“Who’s actually coming?”

“So far, just me.”

That’s more than “a bit” short on people, but I have no reason to turn him down.

He’s trying to be welcoming, so I might as well accept.

“Ah, right. Morishita, what about you?” Hashimoto asked, turning to her. “Having a girl join would really make the welcome party more lively.”

Morishita’s response was immediate:

“I decline.”

“That’s a little abrupt, don’t you think? You’re on our side, aren’t you?”

“Watch your wording. If I were to side with a traitor or someone nobody wants around, it’d cause me trouble. Besides, I have an ‘adventure’ to go on around campus. Bye.”

After grabbing her bag, Morishita dashed out of the classroom.

That left only a couple of people behind.

A girl sitting nearby glanced our way, but upon making eye contact with Hashimoto, she immediately left her seat. Looks like it’s destined to be just the two of us.

“What kind of adventure is Morishita talking about?”

“Ah, don’t worry about that. With Morishita, you should only listen to about half of what she says— no, maybe a fifth. Definitely don’t take her every word at face value.”

Hashimoto gave a small shrug, then lightly tapped my back and headed for the door.

“Staying in this gloomy atmosphere isn’t good for your health, let’s go.”

And so, I followed Hashimoto out of the classroom.

## Part 2

I left the classroom with Hashimoto and we made our way into the hallway.

It seemed like homeroom was still going on for the other classes, so the corridor was empty except for the two of us.

“Looks like step one after transfer is going smoothly, at least in terms of staying out of the spotlight.”

“That’ll only be true for a little while.”

Not just Horikita’s class— Ichinose’s class and Ryuen’s class would soon learn about my transfer as well. As time goes on, I’ll draw more and more attention. Sooner or later, there’ll be people who come around to pry or inquire.

“If you don’t feel like dealing with all that, we could go sing karaoke... but just two guys going might be a bit, y’know...”

“Agreed. Let’s pick somewhere else.”

Hashimoto truly seemed to want to throw me a welcome party, so we headed for the staircase to slip out of the school building and avoid any curious gazes.

“I’ve gotta say, though, your guts impress me... planning a transfer to our class and using my entire savings fund to do it.”

“You’ve been complaining about that for days. You really weren’t into it, huh?”



Ever since I told Hashimoto about my transfer, he'd been bringing it up whenever he got the chance.

“Isn’t that a normal reaction? That money was my precious safety net.”

True enough. Hashimoto had done a lot of work behind the scenes—ultimately betraying Arisu Sakayanagi to earn a huge payoff.

It’s only natural he’d feel some resentment at having to give up most of that money at once.

“If we rewind time to before my transfer, would you have chosen not to do it?”

“I mean... I’d be lying if I said I wouldn’t hesitate.”

“Figured as much. Maybe eventually you’d have saved up twenty million private points on your own.”

Hashimoto didn’t deny it, he just gave a small snort of laughter. Saving up 20 million points by yourself is ridiculously hard, but once you do, you’re basically guaranteed a graduation from Class A. Giving up that dream requires a lot of courage and resolve.

“If you want to graduate from Class A, you’ve got to accept some risks.”

“Don’t need you to tell me. I’ve already scaled several dangerous peaks these last two years—like the fight between Sakayanagi and Katsuragi, teaming up with Ryuen and Katsuragi on the uninhabited

island, and more recently taking a stand against Sakayanagi. I poured in a ridiculous amount of effort just to get paid back for it.”

Hashimoto went on proudly about everything he’d done so far. Obviously, each move carried a real risk.

“Try to see the bright side: all your risks finally paid off, because you pulled me into your class.”

“True enough.”

Even so, Hashimoto wasn’t exactly brimming with delight. It’s not easy to be optimistic about the situation with the class now sitting at Class C. No matter how highly Hashimoto thinks of me, the class is still stuck in third place.

If he wanted to transfer, going to Horikita’s class would’ve given him a higher chance of success— Or transferring to Ryuen’s class with me. Either would be simpler than forcing me into Class C.

And naturally, because I’d anticipated Hashimoto’s thought process, I gave him only two choices from the start: pay up so I could join, or refuse to cooperate with me at all. If Hashimoto refused, then I would also refuse to cooperate with him until graduation.

Hashimoto was already perceived as an enemy by his own classmates, and another year of antagonism between us would have been dangerous for him. And there’s no telling when Ryuen might turn on him, too. I left the decision up to Hashimoto to weigh the options on a scale.

“I can trust you, right, Ayanokoji? That you’re gonna lead us toward Class A. I’ll be dragging you onto center stage to show off your abilities.”

Hashimoto sounded pretty insistent. He had earned the right to demand as much, seeing as I couldn’t have transferred without his help in the first place. Still, I couldn’t immediately give him the promise he wanted.

“We’ve already talked about that. Your choice doesn’t come with any guarantees. All you can do is decide whether to trust me or not.”

Whether I truly want to reach Class A, or even if I have some other goal—I never told him. Nor did I reveal my strategy or future outlook. That’s why he couldn’t give me an instant “yes” back then and is still a little uneasy now.

Hashimoto, who had opposed Sakayanagi, effectively helped push her toward her voluntary withdrawal in the end. Even if Class C doesn’t know the full story, a lot of them are definitely wary of him. This is hardly a comfortable environment—one little slip-up and he’ll be the first to face a crisis. Not only did he stay in his class, he’s also vouching for me, someone with no guaranteed benefits for the class—obviously a huge risk.

“Yeah... well, I’m aware of all that.”

Even knowing those risks, Hashimoto still decided to help me transfer. In other words, his dream isn’t to quietly save up twenty million points on his own and jump to Class A, but to team up with me and

bring our class up to Class A. No, for him, it might not even be a dream— it might be something he considers quite real.

“I did agree to your conditions, but at least clue me in on what you plan to do next, right? That’s what makes us partners.”

Still pressing the issue, Hashimoto tried to extract more from me.

“But who’s to say you won’t betray me, the way you betrayed Sakayanagi?”

“Whoa, whoa, don’t joke like that. I went all in on you, Ayanokoji—I’m practically broke now. Betrayal would get me nothing!”

Hearing my words, Hashimoto frantically ran ahead and made exaggerated gestures to prove his innocence.

“You’re Hashimoto, after all. There’s always a one or two percent chance.”

“No, no, that’s absolutely impossible. Let everyone else doubt me if they want, but come on, man— cut me some slack.”

I’m not actually worried about Hashimoto betraying me. But a bit of pressure never hurts to keep him on his toes.

“Maybe I went too far, If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have managed to transfer so smoothly. I’ll tell you the plan from here on out. Or, more precisely, the strategy.”

“Geez, why not just say that from the start?”

I took out my phone and double-checked a certain person's reply. It might be a good idea to bring Hashimoto with me to our upcoming meeting.

“Let's go to the Keyaki Mall.”

“You're not suggesting we do a welcome party— this is about telling me your plan, right?”

I nodded, and Hashimoto, satisfied, nodded back as well.

“Oh, and— By the way are you coming too, Morishita?”

I asked, turning to face the person who'd been hiding behind us, eavesdropping.

Morishita, who had left the classroom earlier, emerged from behind.

“As expected of you, Kiyotaka Ayanokoji. Maybe you're not popular, but you're pretty sharp when it comes to sensing someone's presence.”

She was probably making a pun about “popular” (ninki) versus “people's presence” (hitoke) in Japanese.

*[TL note: In Japanese, the kanji 人気 can be read in two different ways: ninki for “popularity” or hitoke for “signs of people.”]*

That was at least easier to understand than the stuff about making a hundred friends.

“Huh? So you were paying attention after all, Didn't you say you were off on an ‘adventure’?”

“Investigating the current truth is my adventure, you see. One is Kiyotaka Ayanokoji, the unwelcome newcomer in our class, the other is Masayoshi Hashimoto, the traitor. If interacting with you two doesn’t count as an adventure, what does?” “Oh, come on... Ah, forget it. Correcting you is just a waste of breath.”

“Heh, so you’re finally admitting you’re a traitor.”

“Yes, yes, and how do you feel about tagging along with a traitor? Didn’t you just turn down the welcome party?”

“I’m not interested in any welcome party. I’m acting for the sake of Class C’s survival. It’s perfectly natural for a Class C student to try to communicate as soon as possible, right? You’re heading off to meet Honami Ichinose now, aren’t you?”

Morishita grinned mischievously, as if she already knew our plans.

“Honami Ichinose? Wait, why would you bring her up?”

“Hmph. A traitor like you doesn’t inspire much trust, does he? Seems Ayanokoji Kiyotaka didn’t fill you in on the plan.”

Morishita's words were like a provocation. Hashimoto, who was usually all smiles, now had a slightly stiff expression.

“Wait, did you tell Morishita everything in advance?”

He looked at me as though complaining.

*How could you leave your main sponsor out of the loop?*



“This time, I needed the whole class on board for the transfer. You, already carrying several ticking time bombs, couldn’t manage that. But Morishita, who was suspicious of me, demanded some solid information before agreeing to help— unlike you, who was more receptive from the start.”

“I get it, but... losing out to Morishita still stings. Whatever. As long as I’m in on it from now on, it’s water under the bridge.”

Hashimoto sighed and walked on ahead, probably figuring any further protest was pointless.

I slowed my pace to walk alongside Morishita.

“So, what’s your plan?”

“My plan?”

“I’ve already explained our future direction to you. There was no need for you to specifically meet us today, right?”

If she went to the trouble of tailing us, she must have wanted to join from the beginning.

“Yes, you explained the parts that concern you, but Honami Ichinose is another matter. I need to see for myself whether that so-called ‘do-gooder’ Class D can be of any use to us. Given their leadership style so far, I don’t have very high hopes.”

They may be trustworthy, but they’re not necessarily reliable.

Ichinose is formidable, but there’s also a layer of weakness beneath her strength. Basically, Morishita seemed to consider Ichinose an

unreliable leader. So she wanted to meet her in person and decide whether teaming up would be worthwhile.

“All right, detective. Go ahead and observe keenly without restrictions.”

“You don’t need to tell me that.”

With that, the three of us headed for the cafe where we had planned to meet Ichinose.

## Part 3

We each ordered our drinks at the cafe counter.

Even though my transfer had drained all my savings, I had already borrowed 20,000 private points from Hashimoto in advance, using the points I'd receive in May as collateral. So, I had no issues paying for my drink. While waiting with my receipt for the coffee, I noticed a “Staff Wanted” sign posted in the cafe.

Not just the cafe—shops all across the mall were posting similar signs. Even though our school's students meet the age requirement, working part-time is prohibited by the school, and the same likely goes for the teaching staff. Those staff-wanted signs must be aimed at other staff in the mall.

My thoughts drifted to those trivial matters. Before long, our drinks were ready. Hashimoto had saved a large table for us, so I carried both his drink and mine over to our seats.

A few minutes later, we spotted Ichinose waving at us. She exchanged a few words with the staff at the counter, then picked up her drink and came over to us.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayanokoji-kun. Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san are here too, huh?”

She greeted Morishita, who gave a small nod in return without saying much. It seemed the two of them hardly interacted normally.

“You don't mind having two more people in on this, right?”

“Of course not. I’m totally fine with it.”

After hearing our brief exchange, Hashimoto gave a faint smile.



「驚いてなさそうなところを見ると

……知ってたのか？ 綾小路の移籍」

「少し前にね」

「森下も、一之瀬が先に知ってたことを知ってたそうだな」

「知っていたことを知っている。」

「知らない人は覚えてね？ なかなか面白い表現です」

“Seeing that you don’t look very surprised... you already knew didn’t you? About Ayanokoji transferring?”

If Ichinose had only learned about my transfer from the school this morning, she’d likely be much more startled. But here she was, showing no reaction or even a hint of doubt about my transfer. It was natural for Hashimoto to reach that conclusion after seeing her composed demeanor.

“A little while ago, yeah.”

“Looks like Morishita also knew that Ichinose found out first.”

“Of course. It’s interesting to see how people act when they’re clueless. Remember that, everyone. It’s quite interesting.”

“Meaning... what, exactly? Are you trying to dodge the issue by spouting nonsense?”

“I have no intention of that. But let’s see... only one person here doesn’t know the full story, right?”

With a mischievous look, Morishita slowly lifted her index finger and pointed it toward Hashimoto. He lightly brushed her hand aside and gave me an annoyed look.

“So it’s just me, huh? I thought we had a close connection.”

“You’re just the only one here who didn’t know. Overall, I haven’t shared anything with the rest of Class C, either.”

“I also didn’t tell anyone in my class,” Ichinose said, as if to console him. “They were all pretty shocked and had no idea what was going



on.”

Still, Hashimoto seemed unable to accept it.

“Thanks for the sympathy. All right, then— I’d like a clear explanation about everything now. That includes why you knew, Ichinose.”

He looked a bit intense, less about the strategy itself and more about whatever else was going on.

“So why Ichinose in particular? Could it be that you broke up with Karuizawa just to start dating her...? Please don’t tell me this is all heading in that direction.”

Whether he picked up on some closeness between me and Ichinose or was just guessing, he put his suspicions right on the table.

“That’s pretty bold. I admit I had a faint suspicion too.”

Their eyes moved between Ichinose and me.

“Just that alone wouldn’t be a reason for me to transfer.”

“Then how do you explain Ichinose knowing about it? Give me a reason I can believe.”

“Of course. To reach Class A in the coming year, Ichinose's help is essential. If she wasn't willing to cooperate, I wouldn't have transferred to Class C.”

“That’s quite a grand claim. What sort of ‘help’ are we talking about?”

“You seriously plan to form an alliance with Ichinose’s class— is that right?”

I nodded in response.

“Huh?”

Hashimoto was so thrown by the word “alliance” that his mouth hung open, clearly not following.

“Yes. In fact, Ichinose and I have already formed a full alliance— one that lasts not just for the short term or as the situation demands, but through the entirety of our third year.”

I started by explaining the basic part of our strategy that Hashimoto wanted to know. But it didn’t clear things up for him— he only looked more confused.

“That can’t be right. Only one class can graduate as Class A. There’s no way a ‘full alliance’ is possible.”

Hashimoto likely thought I was spouting nonsense, or maybe joking. It was the reaction I’d expected, so I saw no need to respond too forcefully.

“Not necessarily. Yes, an unconditional alliance between classes is impossible because there’s always competition. However, Ichinose and I aren’t aiming for personal wins or losses. In this situation, if we agree not to interfere until all four classes are on relatively equal footing, there’s no big conflict in maintaining an alliance.”

The measured tone of my reply probably told Hashimoto I was serious.

“What are you saying...? Wait, that’s not possible. Even if the lower-ranked classes team up, the school decides what kind of exams happen and how they’re structured. If we face off against Ichinose in the next exam, there’s no way we could cooperate. At best, we can do something like a gentleman’s agreement to avoid expelling each other. Otherwise, in a must-win scenario, it’s impossible to collaborate—”

Hashimoto was right about alliances being complicated where victory is at stake. Before I could elaborate, Ichinose nodded and gave him an explanation.

“For the past two years, we’ve learned there are a lot of elements we can’t manipulate— rightly so, from the school’s perspective.”

Sometimes they assign matchups, sometimes they let us choose our opponents. That’s the basic pattern of special exams we’ve learned through daily life here.

“So we’ve taken all that into account and created detailed terms. If our classes end up facing each other, we’ll adopt the policy ‘Let whichever class has fewer class points win— even if it’s just one point less.’ There are fine details to add, but by deciding the winner in advance, avoids conflict.”

After hearing this, Morishita sighed.

“You’re serious about that? I get the basic idea, but letting each other win is meaningless. Handing victory to whoever’s behind by even a

single point means the other class loses a precious chance to gain class points. In these limited special exams during the final year, passing up a win is basically suicide.”

“I take it from your tone, Hashimoto-kun, that you guys have mostly come out on top so far in special exams?”

“Well, up until recently, we were Class A.”

“That was only until just recently, right? With Arisu Sakayanagi dropping out, your class took a serious hit.”

“That’s why we brought Ayanokoji on board.”

“And part of the reason for my transfer was this alliance with Ichinose.”

“So the alliance is apparently a done deal?”

Hashimoto asked skeptically. He glanced between me and Ichinose, both of us nodding, then shook his head vigorously.

“All right, let’s assume an alliance for a minute. One, there’s no guarantee that the class that wins now will return the favor next time. If we enter the next special exam under this scheme—”

As it stood, Class C would have to let Class D win in the next test.

“But, the trust Ichinose has built over the past two years is enough to make this alliance viable.”

Hashimoto was at a loss for words, apparently not wanting to accept such an outlandish idea.

“For a 'traitor' like Hashimoto Masayoshi, this is unbelievable, right?”

“That’s mean... So how about you? Can *you* understand it?”

“No matter how many times I hear it, I still think it’s pretty dumb.”

“See, Ayanokoji? Morishita agrees with me.”

"It's not exactly that I agree with *you*." Morishita corrected him.

“You could at least agree with me for once... Never mind. Anyway, I get that you trust Ichinose more than you trust me, but that’s not the issue here— betrayal is still a big risk.”

“If the next special exam pits us against Ichinose and we let them win, do you really think Ichinose would turn around and stab us in the back afterward?”

Hashimoto folded his arms and looked at Ichinose. Then he shifted his gaze slightly from Ichinose, considering it in his mind. After a silent moment of contemplation, he looked up at her again.

“Well... probably not... I don’t think she’s untrustworthy.” he said, averting his eyes and scratching his cheek, embarrassed.

“I’m glad you trust me at least a bit.”

Ichinose said with a gentle smile, gazing at him.

“Men sure are simple creatures, aren’t they? So foolish.”

It was as if Morishita's comment brought Hashimoto back to reality. He looked like he was about to object, but then lost interest cradling his cup in both hands and muttering to himself.

“But listen— right now, we’re only at the start of our third year, Things might become utter chaos in a few months. Even if Ichinose can be trusted, that doesn’t mean all her classmates can. The same is true on our side. If it comes down to it, who’s to say people won’t break their word?”

“Of course,” Ichinose answered, “we’ll terminate the alliance if it ever becomes necessary. Like you said, no alliance can last forever. But at this point, our class has nowhere else to turn, which is why, at last, we’re partnering with Ayanokoji-kun.”

In short, betraying us wouldn’t benefit them more than continuing the alliance would. Just as I trust Ichinose’s record of reliability, she sees me as someone whose power she can rely on right now— an excellent balance.

“...So you really do think highly of Ayanokoji?”

Ichinose looked straight at him and answered.

“Yes, the same as you do, Hashimoto-kun.”

“I see... But I get what you’re saying, Ichinose. There’s no upside in betraying us on your end. Still, we have no guarantees on our side, right? Unless you’ve both signed some strict contract?”

He eyed us as if that were his only logical conclusion.

“No, there’s no formal contract,” Ichinose said with a polite smile.

“We’re sticking with a verbal agreement.”

“You’re being way too trusting.”



“It’s enough. Just like Ayanokoji-kun trusts me, I trust him too.”

Her unwavering stance left Hashimoto scratching his head in disbelief.

“I really don’t get it...”

“If all you think about is betrayal, of course you wouldn’t understand, But I don’t understand it either.”

Morishita added, still treating Hashimoto like a fool, her tone showed she wasn’t on board with my and Ichinose’s arrangement.

“Putting aside issues of trust, would this alliance actually achieve anything practical? It’s not like there’s no benefit, but is this really how we’re going to compete for Class A graduation?”

Morishita's doubtful eyes clearly said: Too unrealistic.

“I have the same question. Even if we don’t worry about trust, is a partnership between our two classes that big of a deal? At best, we’d just avoid fighting each other. I don’t see how that gets us close to catching up with Horikita’s class or Ryuen’s.”

Indeed, the opportunities to gain class points are limited, which was likely Hashimoto’s main perspective on the alliance.

“The alliance's benefits go beyond just mutual support and non-hostility. By becoming true allies, the amount of information we can gather daily will increase exponentially. It's not just about academic or sports exams; it's beneficial in all sorts of situations, There's strength in numbers. Gathering students skilled in certain areas to support those who aren't will have a multiplier effect. This approach could have

been useful in the special exams on the uninhabited islands in the past, too. Plus, with classes working together, we can pool private points when needed. If a situation requiring a large sum of points arises, we can handle it easily. All of this will help in special exams.”

Of course, it won't guarantee we can handle every situation. Maybe it'll only be useful in two or three out of ten situations. But we can achieve things a single class can't. This option can be considered a weapon in itself.

“I get it, being able to make up for each other's weaknesses is good... But if this alliance comes out into the open, won't the top two classes just team up as well? That'd be terrible for us.”

“You don't have to worry about that, Those two top classes can't combine forces in a way that benefits them both. Sharing class points or letting each other have victories does them more harm than good. And Horikita aside, Ryuen has zero credibility. They can't trust him enough for an arrangement like that, nor do I see Horikita agreeing to it.”

Even if Horikita was willing, teaming up with someone as self-serving as Ryuen would be unsettling. That man puts his own interests first, so an alliance with him would be risky.

“...Yeah, I guess so. But there's always stuff like signing a formal contract. Like Ryuen and Katsuragi did, forcing them to abide by certain conditions.”

“A contract witnessed by the school is possible, But that would actually be a good thing for us.”

“You mean if they sign a contract?”

“Right. A top-tier alliance would come with heavy restraints. They’d end up in situations where they’re forced to give up a guaranteed win. With a strict contract, neither side could betray the other.”

“Oftentimes, a perfect contract can turn into a fatal weakness for the parties involved.”

“Conversely, our agreement isn't so restrictive. It's not about betrayal or non-betrayal, but about adapting flexibly to changing situations. We'll adjust based on the battle. Even if a class point difference arises, we can provide full support to one class until it's evened out.”

Normally, a treaty would be essential. But the benefit of not signing is that it gives us more options.

“I never considered the possibility that not signing a contract could be an advantage. So eventually, we’ll dissolve the alliance and fight head-to-head?”

“As Ichinose said, once both of our classes catch up to Horikita’s and Ryuen’s, our alliance naturally ends.”

All of that depends, of course, on Ichinose’s promise. She nodded in acknowledgment to reassure Hashimoto and Morishita.

“All right. I can accept that, but I’ve got another question,” Hashimoto said, getting more serious. “Why are you working with Ayanokoji in

the first place, Ichinose? I mean, me and Morishita do plan to back him as our leader, but right now, the class is basically rejecting him. If Ayanokoji ends up being labeled incompetent, the alliance's value drops to zero—and might even hold you back. That's a big risk you're taking, no?"

This time, he addressed Ichinose directly, presumably confident in his ability to read her.

*But would that approach work on this newly changed, more mature Ichinose?*

"You know we've fallen all the way to Class D, right?"

"Of course. That's why forming an alliance, a conservative move like this, isn't even a full step forward. It is just half a step forward. Hearing about it made me a little worried."

"To borrow your phrase, instead of worrying about taking a full step forward, it's better to take a solid half step first. And unlike Hashimoto-kun's class right now, our class has been struggling for two years, and we're not just not progressing, we're falling behind. So, from the start, we had no choice but to welcome this option."

Ichinose responded, her tone determined. Seeing Ichinose's positive attitude, Hashimoto nodded.

"To rephrase the question, what if Ayanokoji doesn't become the leader? Or what if the condition to become leader is to drop the alliance with Class D? Would you honestly back out then?"

Hashimoto pressed further. Hashimoto was afraid of a half-hearted commitment from the other side. Or a situation where Ichinose's class just cling on Class C as a burden.

“To put it bluntly, you're like dead weight to us. Between our class and Ichinose's class, it's obvious who holds the power. If you still want an alliance on top of that, I'd expect equal returns.”

“Returns? Like what, specifically?”

Ichinose asked, waiting to hear his demands. Morishita cut in before Hashimoto could respond.

“What a shameless man. Exactly what do you expect Honami Ichinose to do for you?”

“Don't assume something inappropriate!”

“What if she said *okay*?”

“Th-there's no way... C'mon! That's not what I meant!”

“That hesitation just now says it all.”

Hashimoto waved his hand vigorously at Morishita, gesturing for her to stop interrupting and turned back to Ichinose.

“Anything, like paying private points or something—”

“Sorry, Hashimoto, but we're building an alliance on equality, not subordination. Setting up a superior-subordinate arrangement would do more harm than good.”

If a disagreement arose, Class C would try to leverage its upper hand and corner Class D. That was exactly the scenario I wanted to avoid.

“You don’t need to worry, If Ayanokoji-kun— rather, if even one person in Class C opposes the arrangement, I’m prepared to accept rejection.”

“Meaning the alliance proposal just dies?”

“Yes, but I doubt that’ll be an issue.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because it’s Ayanokoji-kun who proposed it in the first place.”

Her gaze turned laser-focused, practically piercing him.

“I trust him, so I believe it’ll definitely work.”

“...Got it.”

“Sorry, but can we cut this conversation short?”

“Why?”

I directed their attention to where Horikita and Matsushita had just arrived, clearly still unsure of the situation.

“Tch, of course they’d come after you. I’ll handle this.”

“Make sure you don’t mention our alliance, They can’t guess it yet, and there’s no need to clue them in at this stage.”

“Sure, it’s too soon to let that slip.”

But I guessed Hashimoto's thinking wasn't quite the same as mine.

"Actually, it doesn't matter if it's revealed today or tomorrow."

"Huh? Really?"

"We don't really need to hide it. Being open about it has its own advantages. But Horikita's pretty rattled about my transfer right now. If we dropped this news on her while the wound is fresh, it'd be overkill. Better to wait until the wound from my transfer heals a bit, then revealing it will tear their wound even wider."

"...True. You're really ruthless, aren't you?"

That was just my way of reassuring Hashimoto, Morishita, and Ichinose— signaling that I wanted Horikita's class to fall. It would make them fear me but also feel more secure.

However, my real aim isn't to destroy Horikita, but to push her to grow stronger.

A sudden transfer was already a heavy burden, and an unexpected alliance threat would only make it heavier. Of course, Horikita's spirit might suffer even more later, but I'm not worried.

Thanks to the bonds Horikita had built with her classmates over the past two years, I was confident they could help Horikita get back on her feet.



## Part 4

Horikita and Matsushita left without a word after hearing my blunt statement.

Ichinose also had plans to meet friends, so she waved goodbye and headed off. Watching her go, Hashimoto sighed.

“Those two looked pretty shaken up.”

“So, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka deliberately chose today— right after the entrance ceremony— to transfer, all so he could destabilize Class A as much as possible?”

“If I had finalized it the day before, the information could’ve leaked through the school or the teachers. Minimizing the delay down to nothing was the best move. Even if it’s less than an hour difference, attending the ceremony together in the morning, leaving together just like always— Horikita and her classmates must’ve been subconsciously counting on this final year. I picked the perfect moment to destroy their small hopes and expectations.”

“You even factored that in? That’s downright cold, the way you just snatch everything away. Honestly, seeing them on the verge of tears made me feel bad for them. But it looks like you had no sympathy at all, huh?”

“No, I can’t afford sympathy. I’m here in Class C to get you all into a position to compete for Class A. Whether it’s this transfer or something else, using a strategy when it has the greatest impact is the natural thing to do.”

If I let my emotions waver even slightly, I wouldn't be accepted by Class C. They'd never trust someone with control of the class if he still clung to his old ties.

“Right. Let's keep moving forward, as partners.”

The current gap between each class's points is still wide, and forcing people to drop out isn't something you can do repeatedly. We can't afford any wasted effort if we want to improve our chances.

“I'm still half convinced about this alliance,” Hashimoto admitted, “but at least I'm accepting it for now.”

“I feel the same way, But there's still a big problem, Kiyotaka Ayanokoji. Most of the class doesn't approve of you yet. If they find out you took it upon yourself to form an alliance with Class D and decided our direction without consulting anyone, they'll only get more hostile.”

“I'm aware. Anyone who has an issue with me will make it known sooner or later.”

Even so, right now, all they can do is watch. The entire class contributed their points to make my transfer happen, so that's the so-called 'sunk cost.' Basically, no one wants to believe they wasted their money. So they'll at least give me a chance to show results, even if they complain. For this alliance strategy, which at first glance seems completely absurd, they have no choice but to compromise for now. Hashimoto, who invested a huge sum of money in me, is a prime example.

“Winning the class over is the first priority, then.”

“Hard to say. There’s no special exam scheduled yet.”

Morishita, standing up, gave Hashimoto a sidelong glance.

“Don’t be so sure.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Morishita?”

“Would *you* entrust the decision-making for special exams unconditionally to a student whose worth is still unknown?”

“I—”

“If you hadn't been involved in bringing in Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, you could easily become the first target for the rest of the class. If you disagree, refute me in one word.”

“One word? That’s impossible...”

“Hmph.”

Seeing he had no comeback, Morishita scoffed and left.

“Talking to that girl is always mentally and physically exhausting.”

“Was she always like this, before I came into the picture?”

“Pretty much, But at least before you showed up, she wasn’t this talkative with other classmates. In that sense, you might be special to her.”

I wasn't sure if I should be genuinely happy about that— I felt a bit conflicted.

## Part 5

Hashimoto and I returned to the first-floor lobby of the dorms. There, a certain student got up upon seeing us. Sensing that person wanted to talk, Hashimoto moved forward.

I stopped him, saying there was no need.

“Go on ahead, Hashimoto.”

“Got it. Looks like you two have a long conversation to get into. Take your time.”

Realizing it wouldn’t be a quick chat, Hashimoto gave a small laugh and pressed the elevator button.

Once he got in, the other person spoke calmly:

“If possible, can we talk somewhere else? Lots of ears around here.”

“Sure, Yosuke. I don’t mind. If you are fine with it, want to go to my room?”

“It might be better if we talk outside.”

Following Yosuke’s suggestion, we left the dorm lobby. But being alone outside might be tricky, with people heading home around this time. We were bound to run into members of Horikita’s class.

“Hirata and... Ayanokoji.”

Sudo sounded at a loss for what to say. Alongside him were Ike, and also Keisei and Akito— people I rarely saw walking together with

them.

“I just ran into Suzune and had a quick talk, so it’s true you transferred to Class C of your own will? There isn’t some strategy going on?”

It is unclear whether Horikita has not returned to the dorm yet or whether she has returned already.

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

Sudo asked, looking genuinely pained. He started to come closer, but Yosuke quickly stepped in.

“Sudo-kun, if we stand around here, more and more people are going to show up.”

“...True.”

“We’ll listen carefully to what you want to say, but let’s move somewhere else first.”

I agreed with that and suggested heading around to the back of the dorm. Sudo and the other three followed without hesitation. Before long, we’d made our way to the little dead-end spot behind the dorm entrance.

Sudo’s patience reached its limit, and words began spilling out again.

“Why, Ayanokoji? Why transfer? We finally made it to Class A. There’s no need to drop all the way down to Class C, right?”

“Ha, so it’s because of Karuizawa, isn’t it?”

Ike cut in, sounding like he wasn't just making a joke.

“Hey, Ike...”

“No, think about it. There's no other reason, right? Maybe he got dumped and felt embarrassed.”

“Yeah, that might be one of the reasons.”

“You see! I was right—ow!”

Ike swung his arms around in excitement, probably about to shout, “I knew it!” when Sudo smacked him on the back.

“That's not true. Ayanokoji's gotta be lying. No way that's the real reason.”

“Oww... But he basically admitted it. You're saying he's lying even though he said so himself? That's confusing...”

Ike rubbed his back in pain and frowned at Sudo.

“So what's the real reason?”

Akito asked with his voice filled with frustration.

It would've been easy to answer, but there were various reasons why I couldn't.

“There's no point in explaining.”

“Of course there is. Do you realize how we feel right now? Haruka's been miserable since we heard the news— she keeps muttering,

‘Maybe this is my fault. Maybe I pushed Kiyotaka too hard trying to fix things.’”

It was true that I had a short conversation with Hasebe before the special exam at the end of the second year. It wouldn’t be surprising if she thought what she said back then influenced my choice.

“She’s been agonizing over this even before today. She feels guilty that she never properly thanked you after all the help you gave her.”

Keisei nodded in agreement. Yosuke seemed to recall something similar as well.

“Ayanokoji-kun once helped me work through my own issues. If not for him, I’d have probably left this school a long time ago.”

Yosuke had been deeply hurt by the expulsion of three classmates, blaming himself for it. Without my support, he might have crumbled back then.

“That’s why I respect your strength, I thought of you as a reliable ally in our class. But in the unanimous special exam and at the end-of-year special exam, there were things I couldn’t process. Or rather, things I just couldn’t accept. Of course, part of it is my own lack of skill, but even so, I can’t deny I ended up with some doubts about you.”

By the end of spring break, at the celebratory gathering Horikita arranged, I’d already noticed the slight change in how Yosuke treated me. Back then, he didn’t address me by my first name. Today confirmed he must have been distancing himself from me. It’s the



same way I sometimes switch to more formal speech when relationships change.

“It’s not just Sudo-kun or the people here. Everyone in class is worried. They’re all confused.”

They wanted an explanation. They wanted to hear me say I had no other choice.

“They’re worried and confused. Well, sure. That’s exactly the reaction I intended by keeping quiet about my transfer.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

For a brief moment, it was as if his brain refused to process what he had just heard. Keisei adjusted the frame of his glasses and asked me to repeat what I said.

“Exactly what it sounds like. I kept silent so it would throw the class into chaos. As for other reasons, it’s simple. Class C was in trouble now that Sakayanagi left, so I offered them a deal. They paid me with private points, and in return, I transferred to help them.”

*A deliberate move.*

*A selfish move.*

I stressed that the transfer was for my own sake. Though some parts were false, it was also the truth.

“W-wait... Are you...serious?”

Sudo was the one who spoke, but Akito and Keisei wore nearly the same shocked look as they heard my words. Only Yosuke remained calm.

“Hey, I’ve been wondering all morning— why on earth does it have to come to this?”

In the tense atmosphere, Ike tilted his head, clasped his hands, and rested them on the back of his head.

“I get that C-Class is in trouble without Sakayanagi, but seriously— after paying a huge sum of 20 million private points, why are they trying to poach Ayanokoji? It makes no sense at all. It seems like their whole aim is to weaken us A-Class, but realistically, wouldn’t there be plenty of other students worth poaching?”

It was a reasonable question. Apart from Sudo and Yosuke, the rest likely couldn’t accept that I was valuable enough to be poached.

“I thought the same when this all started. That’s why I suspected there was something more behind the transfer. Are you not willing to tell us the real story?”

Keisei, agreeing with Ike’s point, clearly wanted to learn what the hidden reason was.

“The ‘truth’ I mentioned is exactly that: They paid a lot because they needed my help. Whether I’m worth those points or not is hard to prove at this stage, but that’s just a matter of time.”

“Nah, come on, there’s no—”

Before he could finish, Sudo stepped up and put a hand on Ike's shoulder.

"This is a huge deal, Kanji."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean Ayanokoji's transfer. You don't get it."

"Then do you get it, Ken?"

"Ayanokoji— Look, I don't know everything either, but—"

"Then what are you even trying to say?"

"Even so, he's still important to our class!" Sudo shouted angrily.

Yosuke gently tried to calm him, then faced me again.

"I want to confirm something today: Why did you leave our class? If it was for our sake, then I don't want anyone to misunderstand."

"Don't worry. It was one hundred percent my own choice."

"...So that's really how it is, huh."

Though it might be different on the inside than it appears on the surface— at least, that wasn't how Hirata read the situation at the moment. He was sensitive to all things concerning our class, so he must have decided that my presence had both pros and cons, and perhaps felt no deep shock about my departure. In his mind, he was likely considering how my leaving would affect the class's stability.

“‘That’s really how it is?’ Hey, Hirata, are you okay with just letting him leave?!”

“Whether it’s good or bad, it was Ayanokoji-kun’s decision. Besides, the paperwork is done. Getting him back would cost another huge amount of private points, which we can’t just gather right away.”

“If Ayanokoji regrets leaving, I’ll put together every point I can! Hey, you guys!”

Sudo appealed to all the boys, including Ike. But Ike was hardly listening, and neither Akito nor Keisei nodded. Since I’m showing such a detached attitude and making it clear that I left on my own, they probably don’t think they can call me back— and even if they could, they wouldn’t be inclined to.

“Kiyotaka left our class of his own free will, We have to respect that.”

*[TL Note: It says Kiyotaka in the original text instead of Ayanokoji-kun which is what Hirata should be saying here. Most probably a mistake in the original.]*

“But...!”

Yosuke turned away from Sudo, who still refused to give up, and looked at me.

“Is there anything you would like us to pass on to everyone?”

“No, nothing.”

“...I see. Understood. Sorry for taking your time.”

Yosuke said and left. He probably wasn't at ease internally, but there was no way for him to fix anything here. Rather than push the issue, he had to focus on keeping his class stable and on finding ways to prevent problems from arising among his classmates.

“Suzune *really* depended on you. How are you gonna face her starting tomorrow...?”

“Let it go, Ken. Now we know Ayanokoji chose to leave by himself.”

Ike said, pushing Sudo from behind, urging him to leave.

“Even if you left our class, we're still friends. If you run into trouble, come talk to us.”

With that said, Akito and Keisei also headed back to the dorm.

I watched my old classmates leave, then decided to return to my dorm a little later.

## Chapter 4: Outsider's Perspective

The day after the entrance ceremony, I left my dorm early in the morning to head to school.

Along the way, I didn't run into any of my former classmates and arrived on campus in silence. Well, that was expected: I left about 30 minutes earlier than usual.

My reason for doing so wasn't to avoid people's eyes or on a whim. My top priority right now is to thoroughly understand Class C—in other words, to grasp the internal situation of this new class. Not through OAA data alone, but by seeing and hearing everything with my own eyes and ears, so I can absorb information more effectively.

For that, I can't just sit around waiting for things to happen. I have to take the initiative.

*Who arrives first?*

*Who arrives last?*

*Who talks a lot?*

*Who talks little?*

*Who's good at reading the room, and who isn't?*

Observing these things is my first step.

When I reached the 3rd Year Class C classroom, I slowly opened the door.

The room should have been empty, but—

Right from the start, something unexpected happened.

I had intended to be the first one in, but that plan failed. Looking ahead, I could see a female student seated next to my desk.

She was facing her tablet. When she heard the door open, she glanced over in mild surprise.





I hadn't made any particularly loud sound when opening the door, so her being startled must have been because she wasn't expecting anyone else to arrive this early. But her expression soon softened.

"Morning."

After taking a small breath, I greeted the first person in class, who happened to be seated next to me— Asuka Shiraishi.

"Good morning."

Shiraishi replied politely.

### OAA

<b>Name:</b>	Asuka Shiraishi
<b>Academic Ability:</b>	B+ (76)
<b>Physical Ability:</b>	D (34)
<b>Quick-Thinking Ability:</b>	C+ (57)
<b>Social Contribution:</b>	C- (44)
<b>Overall:</b>	C (54)

Her academic level is above average, but her physical ability is too low. She doesn't seem like someone who's particularly outgoing, nor do I recall hearing of her interacting much with students from other classes.

That's the extent of what I know about Shiraishi from OAA over the past two years.

I took another look at her appearance and features. The most eye-catching thing is the mole under her left eye, and her lovely long blonde hair held by a headband. Her calm, gentle expression gave the impression of someone quiet and not picky.

In fact, from the few times I've seen her over the last two years, I remember her as someone who never stood out much.

This situation differed a bit from my plan, but I might as well go with the flow.

They may rearrange seats at some point, but at least not in the near future. Given that, getting along with my neighbor is a key to school life. Just like two years ago, when my school life began with talking to Horikita, I can use what I've learned in those two years to forge a path here too.

The first step: figuring out how to start a conversation...

From Shiraishi's OAA data, I don't know her personality, interests, or likes. That means I'll have to figure it out as I go, with no leads.

Stepping closer to my desk, I noticed Shiraishi seemed to be studying first thing in the morning. She was holding a pen and working on problems on her tablet, so I waited a moment before speaking. We've passed each other many times over these two years, but this is my first time trying to talk with her.

"Didn't expect anyone to be here before me. You're early."

“—Right. I ended up getting up earlier than usual. But you're pretty early yourself, Ayanokoji-kun.”

I simply followed up on her greeting, and she responded politely. Her words were a bit hesitant— maybe because she doesn't know me well yet, or perhaps she didn't want to talk at all, but felt obliged to continue the conversation since we were alone together. It is still unclear which it is.

“For me, it's basically like transferring to a new school. Rather than being welcomed by others, I prefer to come in first and welcome them.”

That reply held a certain amount of truth. I decided to keep the conversation going until she showed clear disinterest. Letting silence hang in an empty classroom with just the two of us felt awkward.

“It's quite a funny coincidence, don't you think, Ayanokoji-kun? Two neighbors, alone in this quiet classroom, both came early.”

“Yeah, maybe so.”

The word “coincidence” carried a strange feeling. At least Shiraishi didn't seem annoyed, so that was good.

Now, how to keep the conversation flowing? As far as I had gotten, it really wasn't as easy as I hoped.

I had plenty of ideas, but deciding which ones were suitable to say was a different matter, and I wasn't confident. If Hirata was here, he'd

manage a natural conversation without missing a beat and without calculating his every move.

“Why did you decide to transfer here anyway, Ayanokoji-kun?”

Just as I was hesitating, Shiraishi threw out a question that was only natural to ask. Then, she probed further:

“You worked so hard to rise to Class A, so it’s hard to believe you’d go to a lower-ranked Class C.”

“Ordinarily, it does seem that way.”

“Then... if it’s not ‘ordinary,’ why did you transfer?”

Shiraishi’s lovely eyes were fixed intently on me, clearly wanting to know my true motive.

“Hashimoto and the others must’ve explained most of it. I came as a reinforcement.”

“I get that part. But what’s in it for you, Ayanokoji-kun? No one’s said anything about that. The rumor is that you got a lot of private points out of it— or if you haven’t yet, you’re going to.”

She didn’t hold back, the fact that no one else was around to hear was probably why. Answering her is simple enough.

I want to keep all four classes in balance, which requires elevating Class C and Class D so they can catch up to the top two classes. If it can’t be done from outside, I’ll do it from within. But since I haven’t made our alliance public yet, I can’t tell her those details.

“Honestly, most of our classmates still have doubts about how much you can really influence the class or turn things around.”

“That’s only natural.”

“They’re wondering whether we really need Ayanokoji-kun.”

“That’s a bit late, though. If they had objections, they could’ve refused from the start.”

“Painful, but true. Our class lost its composure after Sakayanagi-san dropped out during spring break.”

One of my conditions for transferring was that the entire class had to accept me. With Arisu Sakayanagi gone, Class C not only lost a valuable asset, but also took a hit to their morale. They were desperate for some solution.

Whether or not Kiyotaka Ayanokoji actually had any abilities aside, the proposal itself— bringing in a new student and decreasing Class A’s numbers— wasn’t a bad option. Though Hashimoto paid most of the bill, the remaining cost for each individual was still significant, so they naturally expected me to deliver results proportional to the price they paid.

“Not many students from Class A would transfer to Class C.” Shiraishi went on.

“Katsuragi-kun was one example, but he did it because he lost his footing under Sakayanagi-san and wanted revenge.”



“So you never considered the possibility I had conflicts with Class A?”

“I... don't see it that way. You used to be reliable to Class A and got along well.”

She offered me a polite compliment, but it felt like there was more behind it. For now, it seemed wise to take it at face value and move the conversation along.

“I don't recall showing that side of myself to the other classes.”

“People outside your class could still see it. In the final special exams of first and second year, you played key roles. That takes both confidence and trust.”

“I see. From your point of view, have you accepted my transfer?”

“As I just said, I think highly of you and have high hopes for you, Ayanokoji-kun. Besides, students like Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san, who pushed so hard for you to transfer, rate you even more highly than I do. Plus...”

“Plus...?”

Shiraishi's lengthy remarks ended here, interrupted by the arrival of a male student.

“Sh-Shiraishi. Good M-morning.”

“Good morning, Yoshida-kun.”



Their seats were a bit apart, but he greeted Shiraishi the moment he walked in. Then he glanced at me, set his bag down at his desk, and came over.

“What’s this, Ayanokoji? You’re here awfully early.”

“I wanted to be the first one here, but Shiraishi beat me to it.”

“In that case, starting tomorrow, get here the moment the school opens. Being the earliest to school would also set a good example. Show up before anyone else until everyone in class accepts you.”

“I see.”

The school opens at 7:15. That’s pretty tough, but maybe it’s not a bad idea to try for a while.

“That suggestion is a bit demanding, don't you think?”

Just as I was about to nod, Shiraishi gently said.

“And when you say 'until everyone in class accepts you,' What do you mean? How would we even measure when everyone has ‘accepted’ him?”

“I, uh, didn’t really think that far...”

Yoshida was caught off guard by Shiraishi and could not hide his confusion.

“If you wanted, you could just keep refusing to accept him no matter what. That’d be unfair, right?”

“I-I don’t mean to be like that!”

“Then why don’t you retract your statement?”

“Ri-right, I understand. Forget what I just said, okay?”

“Great. I knew you’d see reason, Yoshida-kun.”

“Yeah... guess I was a bit overboard.”

“By the way, Yoshida-kun, you are pretty popular in this class. Could you help Ayanokoji-kun get along with everyone?”

“Huh? W-what? Me? Help him?”

“Would you?”

“No way. Don’t be naive.”

I mentally noted “Yoshida is popular in class” for future reference. But I couldn’t yet tell if Shiraishi was praising him genuinely or if it was just flattery.

“I see. Ayanokoji-kun, If I may, then would it be okay to consider me a candidate to help you? Perhaps I can’t do much about the boys, but I can at least introduce you to some of the girls. I’d like to invite you to meet a few friends soon— if you’ll join me?”

As the saying goes, 'the early bird gets the worm.' I didn't seem to have any reason to refuse Shiraishi's offer.

“I would be grateful.”

“Wa-wait a minute! Fine, fine, I’ll lend you a hand, Ayanokoji.”

Yoshida cut in, slamming on the brakes on his earlier statement as if he regretted it.

“Are you sure, Yoshida-kun?”

“Well, yeah. I felt kinda bad about refusing the welcome party. It takes guts to join a class that was your enemy up until recently, so some support is necessary. So, how about we pick a day off? I’m free whenever.”

He smiled at Shiraishi— rather than at me.

“All right. I’ll contact you once we set a day.”

“Okay! In the meantime, don’t push yourself too hard, Ayanokoji.”

He was being so enthusiastic that I just nodded politely. After that, students from Class C gradually started arriving at the classroom, and Yoshida hurriedly returned to his seat.

“He’s so simple minded.”

Shiraishi remarked, glancing over at Yoshida before turning back to me.

“He likes me, you know.”

“That... is pretty obvious.”

It was clear Yoshida had feelings for Shiraishi, though it’s rare to see the recipient of such affection be so certain about it without any hesitation.

“So he can’t stand me meeting another boy on a day off. Maybe he’s hoping I’ll eventually go out with him. Unfortunately for him, even if the day came when it was just me and Yoshida-kun left in the entire world, I wouldn’t choose him.”

Shiraishi recognized she was well-liked but showed no sign of being flattered by it.

It's understandable: She simply has no interest in men she doesn't like.

“Anyway, you'll tell me the reason for your transfer next time, okay?”

She shifted her gaze away and smiled, as if to prove she hadn’t forgotten.

For the moment, we’re just friendly neighbors. However, My analysis of Shiraishi is likely far from over.

## Part 1

Saturday—the first day off after transferring classes.

Even though my class and year have changed, what I need to do is more or less the same.

After finishing breakfast, I was wondering whether to go to the gym when I got a message on my phone:

If you're free today, want to hit the gym together?

It was an invitation from my gym partner, Ichinose. Regardless of her message, I was already planning to drop by the gym, so I texted back that I was in.

She read it immediately, and after a brief exchange, we agreed to meet at our destination. I headed out right away.

Students waiting for Keyaki Mall to open were gathering in small groups at the entrance. I didn't join them but stood off to the side, letting time pass. A second-year Class D student, Kazuomi Hosen, approached me.

Because of his imposing physique and aura, none of the first-year newcomers dared to go near him.

Last year, when I was in second year, we had to interact with the first-years right from the start. But this year, I haven't had any chance to

engage with the new first-year students, so I don't know any of them. There might be someone with notable talent among them.

While I was thinking it over, Hosen came up to me. He was among the most discussed first-year students last spring.

“Yo, Ayanokoji-senpai. Word has it some dumb senpai voluntarily transferred to that fallen Class C. Up to some weird stunt, are we?”

He was being talkative, but there was no amusement on his face. It seemed he wasn't actually interested in the topic itself.

“Who knows?” I replied, acting indifferent. Hosen gave a slight smile and moved even closer.

“Heh, well, whatever.”

Sure enough, he had another reason for coming.

“I've been feelin' my arms dullin' lately, see, So I'm lookin' for somebody to use as my punching bag. Got any ideas?”

After this statement, Hosen rotated his arm.

“Sorry, but I have no intention of fighting you.”

“Don't be so cold, man.”

“If you really want that, why not ask Ryuen?”

Hosen gave a big, dissatisfied sigh, as if I'd just wasted his time by offering that suggestion.

“That coward's not man enough for a proper one-on-one.”

“Wouldn’t multiple opponents be more thrilling for you?”

“Once or twice might be fun, but gettin’ hassled all day’d be a pain.”

If Hosen started something with Ryuen, odds are he would win, but in return, he’d have to deal with sneaky retaliation at some unknown time or place. Hosen could probably guess that himself.

They had a direct confrontation on the uninhabited island exam, but no subsequent incidents of such severity that the school had to intervene. In this school, aside from ignorant first-years, there aren’t many who’d dare try fighting Ryuen outright. In a sense, he’s set up effective protection for himself.

“By the way, looks like you guys might make it to Class C?”

Just talking about violent topics was pointless, so I tried to gather information about the second year's situation.

In the second-year that Hosen belongs to, there hasn’t been a single change in class rankings all year. However, including Class D, every class was still in a position where they could potentially win.

“Who cares? I just focus on piling up points. I leave the rest to Nanase.”

“You leave it to Nanase? It’s unusual for someone with your personality to hand things off— but it’s a wise choice. She seems more suited for leadership than you.”

“What’s that s’posed to mean? You lookin’ to fight me, senpai? In that case—”



Hosen immediately steered back to talk of violence.

“Ayanokoji.”

Chabashira-sensei approached us, looking somewhat tense around the hot-blooded Hosen. Seeing a teacher appear, Hosen clicked his tongue and got ready to leave.

“Later, senpai. I’ll play around with some of the interesting first-years. Once I’m done, you can be my sparring partner.”

“Sorry, that’s not the role I plan on playing.”

I murmured under my breath, quiet enough that Hosen couldn’t hear.

Chabashira-sensei then grabbed my arm.

“Come with me.”

With a sense of indirect authority and pressure, she led me to a corner of that floor.

“What is it?”

“...I just want to talk to you. As a homeroom teacher— no, as your former homeroom teacher— I shouldn’t be meeting you so casually, but there’s something I have to confirm.”

She sounded conflicted, her expression lacking the usual firm resolve. She’d probably spent the past week deep in thought.

“You’ve been following me ever since I left the dorm, right?”

“...So you noticed.”

“Well, it wasn’t very hard.”

Her following skills were about as lacking as Morishita’s. Definitely not professional.

“You had no guarantee I’d even leave my room this morning. How long were you planning to wait?”

Even though the weather was getting warmer, it was still cold this early in the day. She could've caught a cold, but Chabashira-sensei didn’t seem to care.

“That’s not important. I want to ask about your transfer... why you decided this without a word... why...”

“Ah, the transfer again. To be honest, I’ve heard that question so often this week I’m getting tired of it. Doesn’t matter which grade or whether they’re male or female— everyone’s asking.”

Still, no other teacher had directly confronted me until now. As a teacher, she shouldn’t really be involved in every student’s decision to transfer or leave.

“What’s going on? Could you at least give me an explanation?”

I had no obligation to explain in detail. Chabashira-sensei knew this and yet hadn’t backed down.

“You transferred classes... without saying anything. Are you sure nothing forced you into this?”

“What exactly do you mean?”

“I... Of course, that’s—”

At my question, Chabashira-sensei failed to give a clear answer.

“Oh, right— something I nearly forgot to mention: you can relax about Hoshinomiya-sensei’s issue. She won’t cause trouble for you, the school, or the other teachers by letting her emotions get the better of her.”

“You...!”

Carried away by her emotions, Chabashira-sensei couldn’t hold back any longer. She grabbed my shoulders.

“So it really was my fault, wasn’t it? I got caught up in Chie’s problems... and you sacrificed yourself to resolve it?”

“That’s certainly how you think about things, but rest assured, I’d already been planning to transfer long before Hoshinomiya-sensei’s issue came to light.”

She stared into my eyes, trying to find the truth of my words, though part of her still seemed unable to shake her worries. Even so, she had to see I had no regrets about this decision.

“There’s really... nothing else you’re worried about?”

“Right. I had my sights set on Class C or Class D early on. I didn’t have any complaints about you as a teacher or about the class.”

“Then why? What’s the point in doing something so pointless—”

“Whether it’s pointless or not depends on your perspective. You know I’m not fixated on graduating from Class A, right?”

“...Yes.”

“I transferred for my own reasons— something I absolutely need to accomplish while I’m at this school. I decided it would be hard to fulfill that if I stayed in your class. I won't tell you what that is right now.”

Surely she’d now realize this was my own choice. I didn’t plan on elaborating further— there was a risk she’d discuss it with Horikita and the others in some unexpected way.

“It’s almost time for my workout. I’ll be going now.”

From the teacher’s perspective, prying any further wouldn’t be appropriate. Chabashira-sensei forced herself to hold her composure and gave a small nod.

“...Understood... Sorry for taking up your time.”

Putting some distance between us, I headed to the gym on the second-floor.

## Part 2

After noon on Saturday, Keyaki Mall was packed with students enjoying their lunch break.

Having said goodbye to Ayanokoji in front of the gym, Ichinose rode the escalator down to the first floor alone. She'd arranged to meet some classmates at 12:30 PM for lunch.

“Hello there, Ichinose-senpai!”

On her way, a second-year Class A student, Ichika Amasawa, called out to Ichinose. They weren't especially close but got along well enough to chat casually whenever they met. Amasawa approached with a bright, innocent smile, and Ichinose greeted her with a friendly look.

“Did you go to the gym today, Senpai?”

Amasawa glanced upward toward the second-floor gym and jumped straight to that question, skipping any small talk.

“Mm-hmm. I worked out for about an hour.”

“Should I join too~? Lately I've felt kinda sluggish, y'know? It is really hard to deal with...”

“If you're interested, why not do a trial session? I can go with you if you like.”

“Yeah, but I've been spending like crazy these days! The monthly gym fee feels a bit too much...”

“They do have cheaper plans available.”

“Seriously? Oh, right— Ayanokoji-senpai goes to the gym too, doesn't he?”

A sudden sparkle lit up Amasawa's eyes as she mentioned Ayanokoji's name.

“Yeah. Ayanokoji-kun's into fitness as well, so I invited him to join.”

“I see~ Then I should seriously consider it.” Amasawa said, her eyes practically gleaming.

Seeing that look, Ichinose maintained her smile and asked her a question.

“Huh? Whether Ayanokoji-kun is there or not affects your decision to join?”

“Of course it does! I really, really, really like Ayanokoji-senpai!”

Amasawa formed a heart shape with her fingers as she spoke in a cutesy tone.

“Huh...?”

This sudden confession made Ichinose's eyes widen.

“Oh, it's senpai-love, you know, I mean I like him as an upperclassman, not in a romantic way!”

“I see.”

Ichinose kept smiling as she talked with Amasawa, but she couldn't help wondering why the girl suddenly brought up Ayanokoji in such a roundabout manner. There was little in their past interactions to suggest such a connection, which made Ichinose slightly uneasy. Seeing Ichinose's slight change in expression, Amasawa's gaze briefly sharpened.

“Just kidding~ The truth is, it is LOVE-love.”

She dropped the pretense and said it bluntly.

“Are you perhaps wanting me to help... set you up?”

Amasawa's bold admission made Ichinose assume she might be asking for assistance in confessing to a senior she liked. But Amasawa shook her head.

“No way I have the nerve to confess~ But, but, I've noticed you and Ayanokoji-senpai getting pretty close lately, and I'm kinda jealous. Are you two, like... a couple?”

“Me? I'm not in that kind of relationship with Ayanokoji-kun.”  
Ichinose replied calmly.

However, Amasawa's suspicion only increased.

“Really? You're super cute, Senpai. If you were my rival, I'd totally lose for sure.”

“It's true, so you don't have to worry.”

Amasawa pouted as though about to cry, but Ichinose addressed her seriously anyway.



“You’re not... lying, right? You’re not lying to me, Ichinose-senpai?”

“Of course not. But if you’re that curious about the gym, you should join. This might be your chance to get closer to Ayanokoji-kun.”

Despite continuing to carry herself in a professional, senpai-like manner, Ichinose had begun to sense that this “adorable underclassman” was poking around for a reason. As Amasawa pressed on with talk of romance involving Ayanokoji, Ichinose realized this girl was different from how she had seemed. Amasawa kept up her act, laughing cheerfully and closing the distance to Ichinose.

“You’ve been a little full of yourself lately, haven’t you, Ichinose-senpai?”

The Amasawa who had always played the good underclassman in front of Ichinose now quietly spat out harsh words. A normal person would be surprised by Amasawa's sudden change in attitude, leading to a reaction from them. That was precisely Amasawa's aim in shedding her “good underclassman” facade, but Ichinose didn’t appear fazed at all.

“Sorry if I gave you that impression. I had no intention of it...”

Amasawa wondered if Ichinose had somehow anticipated this. Otherwise, how could she stay so calm?

“You know, I pick up on things pretty fast, though it’s a bit cliché to say it outright... Something must’ve happened between you and Ayanokoji-senpai, right?”

“Huh? Not at all... But you do seem unusually interested in Ayanokoji-kun.”

“Didn’t I mention how much I LOVE him? Precisely because I love him, I see the truth: You’re getting a bit too *fired up* on your own.”

“Fired up?”

Ignoring Ichinose’s reply, Amasawa pressed on.

“That’s because— you and Ayanokoji-senpai slept together, didn't you?”

Amasawa unleashed the bombshell, taking advantage of Ichinose’s earlier promise not to lie. Of course, she had no proof they’d actually had a physical relationship. But after watching how Ichinose, once so downhearted after a special exam, got back on her feet, and how close she seemed to Ayanokoji at the cafe following the entrance ceremony, Amasawa guessed there must’ve been some turning point involving him.

From that angle, it wasn’t far-fetched to imagine they’d slept together. Regardless of the truth, She only wanted to see if Ichinose would waver.

“Well, maybe that does have something to do with me being ‘too *fired up* by myself,’ as you put it.”

“Uh...? You’re not denying it? That’s... shocking.”

“You told me not to lie, Amasawa-san. Remember?”

Ichinose had sensed the malice in Amasawa's words but, as a senpai and a one-sided friend, she still tried not to hurt her.

“O-okay then...”

It was easy for Ichinose to keep smiling until the very end and be kind to others. But since the other party had ill intentions, Ichinose decided to face the enemy head-on after re-judging.

“So you admit you slept with him?”

Ichinose just smiled silently.

“So that means you're secretly dating him?”

“I'm not dating Ayanokoji-kun.”

“Huh? Contradiction, much? So you're hooking up without being a couple?”

“I share a strong bond with Ayanokoji-kun. That's all.”

“A... strong bond? Pfft, hahahaha.”

Amasawa bursted into laughter, clutching her stomach and wiping tears from her eyes.

“Ichinose-senpai, you're really too *fired up*. You're so far gone, Senpai. Get real.”

“Get real?”

“I'm saying Ayanokoji-senpai's just fixated on that incredible body of yours. But you go believing you have some ‘deep bond’ with him.

How naive can you be? No matter how obsessed he is now, one day he'll get bored. He'll toss you aside, bond and all, just like he did with Karuizawa-senpai. Don't get so worked up or you'll regret it."

This open provocation made Amasawa's real motive clear: she wanted to warn Ichinose that growing too close to Ayanokoji would end badly.

"Hey, Amasawa-san, is there any special food you absolutely love—something you rarely get to eat?" Ichinose asked suddenly, changing the subject.

"Huh? Special food?"

Amasawa, caught off guard by the sudden shift, answered with a grin.

"Cake, I guess~"

Among the several options in her mind, Amasawa made a serious choice.

"When you taste a really delicious cake, you want it again, right?"

"Of course!"

"But if you eat it every single day— even your favorite food can get boring."

"Yeah, You might even start to dislike just looking at it"

They agreed, nodding simultaneously.

"That's why you can't have too much of it. The more you love it, the more you should save it for special occasions. You have to hold back

until then. And the more you resist, the stronger the craving becomes — because you've tasted it once and know it's delicious."

Ichinose kept smiling at her underclassman. However, Amasawa seemed to glimpse the true nature hidden beneath that gentle facade.

"Comparing yourself to some fancy cake? Wow, talk about overestimating your own worth. You really believe this is gonna work out? He's Ayanokoji-senpai, you know. You're treating him like some run-of-the-mill boy. You're even sweeter and naive."

"So you know Ayanokoji-kun very well, I see."

"Obviously. Probably better than you do, Senpai. He's the type who keeps a lot of secrets."

For the first time, Ichinose broke eye contact and glanced around them. Then she turned back to Amasawa, locking eyes with her.

"There are no secrets between me and Ayanokoji-kun now."

Ichinose displayed an attitude of complete trust in Ayanokoji. Seeing this, Amasawa couldn't help but burst into laughter again, this time with a mocking look.

"Haha! Good one, Ichinose-senpai. You think just because you've slept with him, you know everything about him? You're too cute—I might end up liking you, too!"

"Well, just like sleeping together doesn't mean you know it all, the relationship you have with him, Amasawa-san, doesn't necessarily mean you understand him, right?"

“I’m telling you, at least in this school, nobody knows more about him than I do—”

“Ayanokoji-kun has told me a lot more than you’d ever guess.”

Ichinose cut her off, ignoring Amasawa’s skeptical glare.

“By the way— for example, about the White Room”

“Huh?”

Up to now, Amasawa had held the upper hand, mocking and prodding. But her expression froze in an instant. She recovered quickly, though, and tried to press again.

“Stop joking around, Ichinose-senpai. Like Ayanokoji-senpai would ever talk about that with an outsider.”

“Perhaps.”

Ordinarily, Amasawa wouldn’t lose her composure so easily, but “White Room” was a phrase that shouldn’t ever come up casually.

“Wait, you’re serious? Ayanokoji-senpai really told you about the White Room?”

She was 100% sure that someone like Ayanokoji, who wanted a normal school life, would never share that topic to someone uninvolved.

“Looks like we share a little secret now, Amasawa-san.”

“N-no, hold on! Exactly how much did he tell you?”

By this point, Amasawa's smile had vanished without her even noticing. Meanwhile, Ichinose remained as composed as ever.

"I can't say. Could be the same things you know— maybe even more."

"That's impossible. There's no way Ayanokoji-senpai would—"

Deep inside, Ichinose was smiling.

In truth, she'd only once heard the unfamiliar term "White Room" during the uninhabited island exam. Ayanokoji told her he had no idea what it meant, so she still didn't know the real story.

But from the way Amasawa spoke as though she knew him better than anyone, Ichinose guessed Amasawa might be connected to that "White Room."

On the flip side, if Amasawa had never heard of the term at all, Ichinose could've still used it to bluff she was more "in the know" than Amasawa. Either way, the outcome would favor Ichinose.

*"White Room" presumably "some high-level cram school"*

This was Ichinose's speculation— she further judged that Amasawa was part of that White Room.

And that meant she'd just learned a little more about Ayanokoji, which warmed Ichinose's heart.

"All right, I've got to meet my friends. I'll be off now. Oh, and if you have any more questions about joining the gym, feel free to ask



anytime.”

Ichinose said, then walked away.

“...Ugh, I let my own emotions get the better of me.”

Amasawa said to herself, a faint smile appearing on her face as she pinched her cheek hard. She'd intended to toy with Ichinose, but the tables were turned.

“I got goosebumps all over. No wonder Ayanokoji-senpai made a move on her. She's more than just a busty senpai.”

She started to walk again, then suddenly stopped.

“Still, he's a guy. There's a chance she's tricked him with those big boobs of hers, got him wrapped around her finger... Then again, that's unlikely.” Amasawa thought, dismissing the idea.

Even so, she couldn't help revising her low opinion of Ichinose. That change was undoubtedly due to Ayanokoji, But Ichinose had definitely changed through her own strength as well.

“This third year's battles are going to be really interesting. Alright~... I'd better get serious, too, so I can see my dear Ayanokoji-senpai happy.”

With that, Amasawa stepped out, determined not to waste her time at this school and ready to pursue her own goals.

## Chapter 5: Crossing Paths

A week had passed since we began our third year of high school.

Before the morning homeroom, I sat alone at my desk, listening to everything around me. One person was missing, and the landscape had changed. But that sadness was slowly being patched over in our day-to-day lives, as though nothing had happened. Those who weren't very close to Ayanokoji-kun hardly mentioned him anymore.

As time goes on, sadness, anger and pain all fade. This is such a perfect example of that. As much as I resent it, I've come to understand that reality.

They're revising the two years in which Ayanokoji-kun was here, acting as if he'd never existed. It's the same as with Yamauchi-kun, Sakura-san and Maezono-san:

*Nobody speaks of the classmates who vanished from the class.*

Still, those of us who were close to him— myself included— haven't reached that point yet. I'm feeling how cruel and merciless time can be. He was gone, that feeling grew stronger and stronger. Matsushita-san has been smiling and talking less, and Sudo-kun is picking fights over small things again, just like in the past.

How has his departure affected me? I can't even look at myself objectively now. Pretending everything is normal, I'm desperately trying to keep Class A together. No, I'm not sure how much of an effect my efforts are having. I can't even distinguish the boundary

between reality and delusion. And so, day after day, I've buried myself in studying at my desk, fighting off the unease inside me. This heavy feeling, the struggle to breathe, the pain in my heart— like I've lost something important, as if a part of my body is gone. It refuses to go away.

*Why did it end up like this?*

*Was this class never good enough?*

*Could this class not give Ayanokoji-kun what he needed?*

I don't know. No matter how many times I think it over, I can't find an answer. It's true that, compared to the other classes' leaders, I lack maturity.

*Was that why he was so gentle with me?*

I thought he would never leave my side— that he would always protect me.

*Did he just hate having to play some caretaker-like role?*

*If I'd been stronger, would he have stayed?*

All of these are words I can't say out loud.

*"I won't rely on you for everything anymore. So please stay by my side and watch over me."*

Looking back, maybe it wasn't so bad that I never expressed what I felt that day at the celebration. After all, it was an impossible wish.

Or... if my feelings had reached him, would he have stayed?

“ — ”

A sigh nearly escaped my lips, but I managed to swallow it so no one else would hear. I couldn't fully accept this new reality. My sense of balance was gone, while time kept marching on.

Eventually, the bell for morning homeroom rang. Chabashira-sensei walked into the classroom, looking like she had put Ayanokoji-kun's transfer behind her— or perhaps she had simply stopped thinking about it.

Before long, Sudo-kun and the others might also shift their focus and move on.

*What about me?*

*Will I one day grow used to it too?*

I can't imagine that.

Here I am, in this place— what do I do now? I used to believe that no matter what, I could charge ahead and keep fighting as long as I had Ayanokoji-kun by my side. But now that he's gone, how am I supposed to spend this next year?

“Are you listening, Horikita?”

“—Huh?”

When I came back to myself, Chabashira-sensei was speaking to me. Several classmates were also glancing in my direction.

“I’m about to explain the details of the special exam. Stop spacing out and pay attention.”

“S-sorry. Right. I’m listening.”

I lied—

*I hadn’t heard a word.*

I hadn’t even noticed someone was talking.

I have to focus on what sensei is saying...

Even if I can’t bear to go on, the world won’t slow down for me.

I think she said something about...

*A special exam.*

My mind was still in a mess, yet now we’re already facing the first special exam of our final year...

I shook my head and turned my eyes to the screen.

## Special Exam Overview

### *“The Comprehensive Academic Test: Whole-Class and Minority”*

#### Overview

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A written exam (100 questions total, worth 100 points) with questions which will be drawn randomly from 21 subjects across 7 academic fields.

It’s a head-to-head competition between classes, divided into two parts: Whole-Class Battle and Minority Battle.

#### Whole-Class Battle

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Everyone in each class participates in the written exam.

The class with the higher total score gets 2 wins.

If totals tie, each class gets 1 win (a draw).

If one class has fewer students, the missing spots are treated as having the same score as that class’s lowest-scoring student.

Anyone absent or leaving mid-exam due to illness is also treated that way.

#### Minority Battle

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Each class selects 5 representatives.

The positions from first to fifth are determined. Representatives with the corresponding positions from each class then compete directly based on their scores.

Every time a student wins by scoring higher than their counterpart, their class is awarded one win.

If the scores are tied, the encounter is considered a draw, and neither class receives a win.

### Minority Battle Special Rules

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You can assign penalty points to specific students. These penalties apply to all of the opposing classmates.

Initially, each class has 100 penalty points they can use against the opposing class's students.

Each penalty point lowers that student's test score by 1.

There is no limit on the number of students who can receive penalties, and penalties can be assigned without restriction (up to 100 per student).

(You can purchase additional penalty points until the day before the exam, at a rate of 50,000 private points each.)

You must inform the homeroom teacher of how many penalty points you're giving and to whom by the day before the exam.



The details of how many penalties were assigned to whom will be disclosed only for the students who participated in the minority battle.

*Note: These penalty points do not affect the Whole-Class Battle score or OAA evaluations.*

### **Victory/Defeat**

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The Whole-Class Battle is worth 2 wins, and the Minority Battle is worth 5 wins, for a total of 7.

Whoever achieves more wins overall takes the match.

If the final outcome is 3 wins, 3 losses, and 1 draw, both classes split the reward equally.

### **Rewards**

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The winning class gains 100 class points (if it's a draw, each gets 50).

If a class manages 7 total wins for a complete victory, it gets an additional 50 class points.

If a class suffers 7 total losses for a complete defeat, it loses 50 class points.

Reading the details, it's basically a standard academic test. But with those special rules, the outcome could change drastically.

"This time," Chabashira-sensei continued, "your opponent is 3rd Year Class D. The exam will be held in two weeks. We don't have much time to prepare, but it's the same for everyone, so don't complain."

3rd Year Class D— that's Ichinose-san's class. This matchup won't be easy at all. Even though I knew that, I still felt relieved we wouldn't be fighting against Ayanokoji-kun.

Ordinarily, I'd be sighing over not getting to face Ryuen's class, since they're weaker academically. But now I am judging everything by whether Ayanokoji-kun is involved or not. It wasn't just me, Matsushita-san and Sudo-kun also seemed relieved.

Although I felt a strong sense of self-disgust, I kept a straight face and looked back at the rules displayed on the screen.

Ichinose-san's class is well-rounded academically, with many excellent students. On top of that, they still have a full 40 students, which is troublesome. The fact that their numbers differ from ours creates advantages or disadvantages even before the match starts.

Though lacking members means we get the same score as our lowest-scoring student for the missing spots, that's still going to be a big handicap. Now that he's left, we're down to thirty-six.

In other words, it's like we have five academically weakest students joining the fight.

“This is just a rough idea, but here’s the predicted scoring scale based on your OAA evaluations. Use it as a reference for how to assess our class.”

Chabashira-sensei said this and changed the display on the screen.

OAA Academics		
<b>A Grade</b>	:	76–85 points
<b>B Grade</b>	:	66–75 points
<b>C Grade</b>	:	56–65 points
<b>D Grade</b>	:	51–55 points
<b>E Grade</b>	:	45–50 points

Judging by these standards, the written exam will be quite difficult. It’s almost impossible to get a perfect score.

“This is going to be a tough battle...”

Sudo-kun muttered with a serious look.

Yes— no doubt, it’s going to be a hard fight. If we face them head-on, our odds of winning are probably under fifty percent.

Our class has made good progress in academics, and in past exams, we’ve managed to barely come out on top against Ichinose’s class. But now there’s a difference in class size to consider.

As far as the Whole-Class Battle goes, we're at a disadvantage. With only two weeks until the exam, both sides will be working hard, so we can't be certain we'll be able to close any academic gap between our and Ichinose-san's class. Yet... exactly because this isn't a standard exam, there's still hope.

If this was a purely academic competition, we'd be the weaker side compared to Ichinose's class. But we have a special rule for the Minority Battle. Even if we lose the Whole-Class Battle, as long as we manage four wins in the Minority Battle, we can still pull off a comeback.

Each class has students with A-level academic ability, so if we only compare our top five, we still stand a chance. Of course, that doesn't change the fact that we're at a disadvantage overall. If they win the Whole-Class Battle, they only need two victories in the Minority Battle to seal the match, whereas we need four. If the Whole-Class Battle ends in a tie, we need three wins in the Minority Battle to pull ahead. But a tie in total points is unlikely, so that's not worth considering.

"Four wins, huh..."

Whether it's realistic or not, suppose the five participants from Ichinose-san's class are all A-level, scoring about 85 points. As long as we allocate penalty points precisely, we have a solid shot. Just giving each one 20 penalty points would drop their scores down to 65. Then again, they have the same right to penalize us.

If we directly send out our best students and they receive a large number of penalty points, their score will inevitably drop, so we can't fully rely on them to win. But if we send someone with B or C academic ability, their scores wouldn't be high, and we might not be able to win.

This way of thinking is open to all classes. So, in the end, we'll probably need to buy extra penalty points. That straightforward approach—throwing private points at the problem—definitely helps shrink the gap. But it's expensive: 50,000 private points per penalty point.

We also have to remember that paying a lot doesn't guarantee an equal return. If we assume a certain opponent will join the Minority Battle and invest heavily in them, yet that student ends up not taking part, we'll be ruined.

Spending hundreds of thousands or even millions of private points in a special exam, only to lose, would be devastating—I can't imagine the damage it would cause.

“...Ah...”

Pressing both hands together, I closed my eyes.

For this special exam, studying hard is important, but so is deciding who will fight in the Minority Battle and how to allocate penalty points to the opponent's members. No matter how I think about it, I can't come up with any other strategies. I can't see us winning by doing nothing.

*I don't know...*

*If only you could advise me.*

*If only you were still here, I know you'd figure out a way to win.*

I closed my eyes, and his image reappeared in my mind.

My chest tightened once more.

“Suzune.”

*Is it really okay to face Ichinose-san's class head-on?*

*Can we win like this?*

*Our academic abilities are close, so is this approach good enough?*

*Is it possible to try to find out who the opponent would use penalty points on?*

*Or should we do something underhanded, like Ryuen-kun would?*

*Who... will they send out?*

*Will Ichinose-san herself join the Minority Battle, or will she stay out of it?*

Along with those questions, the image of Ayanokoji-kun came up in a corner of my mind again, refusing to leave.

*How would he fight?*

*How would he view this special exam?*

I could no longer ask him now.

“Suzune.”

Purchasing some penalty points to lower our risk, distributing them among all the top academic threats in the rival class— We’d have to accept losing a chunk of our private points in the process.

“Suzune!”

“Ah...!”

I jumped a little as I felt something tap my shoulder. It was Sudo-kun’s hand.

“You okay?”

“...I’m fine. I was just thinking about our strategy.”

“That might be part of it... But you’re still hung up on Ayanokoji, huh?”

“I—”

“There’s no way you’re not. But you don’t have to carry it all alone.”

“Yeah. I won’t.”

I can’t let Sudo-kun see me looking so weak any longer. I have to be strong... in times like these. I believed I could do it, but apparently, I’m still lacking.



“How to use penalty points is a very important choice for us... It would be terrible if we focused all our attention on students who might score high, but ended up missing the mark.”

Hirata-kun said, who had evidently begun a conversation with the others at some point. I hadn’t heard a thing before now. They must have already been talking for a while.

“We only just started.” Sudo-kun whispered.

“...Thank you.”

He knew my mind wasn’t fully there. If I don’t pull myself together, he’ll keep worrying.

After I listened to Hirata-kun’s comment, Yukimura-kun— still in his seat— raised his hand.

“I don’t think we can rely solely on the OAA for deciding the Minority Battle. That’s just average data across all subjects. If someone’s weak in one subject but really good at others, they can still get a high overall score. And we also don’t have a perfect picture of who excels at which subjects in our own class, right? Some exam details from the past never got fully shared.”

He was suggesting that we use the insider knowledge of our own class as effectively as possible.

We have two weeks until the exam.

Can I figure out a winning approach for our class?

## Part 1

The day the special exam was announced, after class ended, things proceeded as usual. Mashima-sensei finished homeroom and got ready to leave. At that point, Hashimoto stood up.

“Alright, so for this special exam, the outcome’s in Ayanokoji’s hands.”

Rather than looking for approval, he sounded like he was demanding it from the entire class. Nobody said yes or no. The classroom fell silent, and after a few moments, Shimazaki couldn’t hold back his dissatisfaction and glared at Hashimoto.

“What’s the big idea?”

“What’s the big idea? This special exam is the perfect chance for the newly transferred Ayanokoji to show off his abilities. If we don’t give him command now, when will we? Why did we spend so much to bring him here?”

Hashimoto argued that even if nobody welcomed me, it was only natural that I should take command.

“So, what if we lose?”

“What if we lose? Don’t be ridiculous— we aren’t gonna lose, right, Ayanokoji?”

Hashimoto dismissed Shimazaki’s concern, turning to me for confirmation, his voice filled with expectation but also a hint of pressure.

“I can’t guarantee a win, but if you put me in charge, I’ll do my best.”

I deliberately chose a moderate expression, contrasting the self-assured tone I’d used upon first arriving. The other students’ eyes turned cold. Hearing “can’t guarantee a win,” of course they’d be suspicious.

“Sigh... Hear that, Hashimoto?”

If this were Arisu Sakayanagi, she’d have declared victory early on. Many here probably felt unsettled and disappointed by the difference.

“C’mon, Ayanokoji, say something more convincing. Others will worry, even I’m starting to worry.”

Hashimoto sighed, scratching his head.

“Then, Shimazaki, if we don’t let Ayanokoji lead, what’s your plan?”

“No plan, really— just fight as usual, and win as usual.”

“As usual? Then who’s going to come up with the strategy?”

“We can all talk it over together. I’m not against letting Ayanokoji join in.”

“So, you’re saying there’s no need for a single leader?”

“That’s not it. Of course we need someone in charge. In case there’s a dispute, a leader will guide us. But I’m not giving that role to him this time. To be blunt, from what I’ve heard, this special exam should be a sure win for us. We’ve been top in written tests these past two years,

and the opponent is the bottom-ranked class, right?” Hashimoto paused briefly, then immediately responded.

“That’s only if we’re talking about a normal written test. This is a special exam. We can’t just win without thinking it over carefully.”

“I didn’t say no one would think. I said we can talk it out with the entire class.”

“If you get too many people involved, the risk of leaks goes up.”

“That’d only happen if we had some idiot who’d blab about it. Maybe *you* would.”

“You’ve got some nerve.”

Their argument was watched closely by Sanada, who got up and spoke:

“May I ask Ayanokoji-kun a few questions?”

“Sure.”

“For this special exam, I believe how we allocate the penalty points is the key. If we leave that responsibility to you— predicting who the other class will send, picking the best candidates of our own to avoid being penalized, and producing real results... is that achievable? If you agree, then I’m also in favor of handing it to you.”

Sanada was subtly helping Hashimoto, supporting the idea of entrusting leadership to me, while also addressing the doubts of other students. Sanada looked gently at Shimazaki.

“...I see, so it's not judging Ayanokoji based on victory or defeat, but testing Ayanokoji's abilities through this process, huh?”

“Yes. I also think our odds of winning are high anyway. So if there's any chance the outcome might flip, it would be in the Minority Battle's penalty situation. Even if we all talk it over, we can't guarantee the best approach. While it's risky to put everything on one person, as Hashimoto-kun said, we'd have to rely on him at some point anyway. This is a quick, straightforward test of his capabilities.”

It was a compromise, accepting parts of both sides' arguments.

“That makes sense. So, Ayanokoji, shall we entrust it to you?”

“If everyone's willing, I'll give it my all.”

After hearing this, Shimazaki immediately spoke up in a loud voice:

“Fine— then we'll assume victory is basically guaranteed, and let's use this to judge Ayanokoji.”

“OK, OK.” Hashimoto nodded, satisfied. He clasped his hands together with a loud slap, as if convinced that as long as I was given the opportunity, I would definitely find a way.

“It's settled then, we can discuss other things as we go. Just focus on doing your part.”

“Right... Anyway, for now, I'll just give it my best to figure out who to use penalty points on.”

Hashimoto, worried that dragging the conversation might lead to someone changing their mind, wanted to end it.

“So, Ayanokoji, be ready after class.”

Looks like I won’t be heading straight home when the school’s over.

“Hashimoto Masayoshi was really bothered about being excluded from any talk regarding the transfer.”

Hashimoto's insistence on not allowing this topic to proceed without him was clear evidence of this.

“Is it alright to deeply discuss strategy with someone who might betray us?”

Morishita whispered quietly behind me.

“Your trust in Hashimoto is pretty *thin*, Morishita, isn’t it?”

“I suppose it couldn’t be *thick*, right?”

*[TL Note: Morishita plays on the words "thin" (usui) and "thick" (atsui). The joke lies in her overly literal response—since trust is "thin," there's no way it could be "thick," making it a sarcastic way of agreeing.]*

Because we were *seatmates* (sitting in the front and back seats), it made it easy to have these small chats.

Morishita noticed Hashimoto approaching and cut off our conversation.

“All right, let’s go, Ayanokoji. Morishita, you coming?”

“I’ll tag along for now. I want to see what Ayanokoji can really do.”

“Dorm room, karaoke, behind the dorm— I'm fine anywhere.”

Normally, you would want to discuss strategy somewhere private, but as usual, I purposely suggested the cafe.



## Part 2

We went straight to the cafe without taking any detours.

“Please wait a moment. Let me spend an hour thinking about what to drink.”

“Don’t spend a whole hour!”

Morishita chuckled and smiled at Hashimoto’s complaint.

“I’m just kidding. But still, give me a little time. I need to ask my stomach what it wants to drink first.”

Ask her stomach first? Is that really right?

I feel like asking your brain makes more sense... but oh well.

Behind us were a first-year boy and girl who seemed to be heading to the cafe counter like us. Maybe they saw Morishita’s indecisiveness, because even though they looked like they wanted to line up, they ended up giving up and just stood a little way off, looking at the menu.

“Hurry up and decide, so you don't hold up the line behind us.”

“Got it. I’ll have a matcha latte, then.”

“I’ll order for you two, so could you go grab some seats?”

It wasn’t long after school had ended, so there were hardly any people here. It felt like we could pick any seat, so we just took the same spot as last time.

Morishita and I sat down while Hashimoto was waiting at the counter.

“Aren’t we going to call Yamamura Miki? She was mocking herself the other day as being like oxygen, even *thinner* than carbon dioxide, saying that her existence was simply to be used by people without any care.”

*[TL Note: Here Morishita uses a pun for ‘Thinner’ The word 軽い (karui) in Japanese can mean both "light" in weight (as in oxygen being lighter than carbon dioxide) and "insignificant" (suggesting that she feels unimportant). Comparing her to oxygen, like how oxygen is inhaled without much thought— people use her and then move on.]*

“Yamamura wouldn’t say something so harshly self-deprecating.”

No matter how I look at it, that sounds more like something this class weirdo, Morishita, would say.

“Well, that statement indeed was mine, but I'm sure she's very conscious of it too.”

“I already talked to Yamamura and asked her to keep her distance from me for a while.”

I’d only just transferred, and for several days straight various classmates had been trying to talk to me or sending curious glances my way. Keeping a low profile was impossible for the time being. After all, all sorts of information, from baseless rumors to the truth, are circulating everywhere.

“Even someone with as faint a presence as Yamamura Miki would get pulled into the spotlight. You decided there was no need to lower her ‘use value,’ right?”

“Use value? It’s not that I haven’t thought about that, but I’m more concerned for her as a friend.”

“Oh? Listen to you, Mr. Straight Talk.”

If I speak to Yamamura, she’ll probably try her best to answer me. But that would only make her stand out, same as me, and put pressure on her. It could hurt her feelings.

“What if Yamamura Miki herself said she wanted to stand out, that she wouldn’t mind the attention?”

“Then naturally, that wouldn’t be a problem. She could just show herself bit by bit, at her own pace.”

“How gentle— no, should I say how composed?”

If I forcibly turned Yamamura, who’s only just begun changing her mindset and recently moved closer to Sakayanagi, into a tool, she will probably shut down immediately. Then she wouldn’t be able to serve properly as my eyes and ears.

In other words, pushing too hard and causing her to break would be a bad move.

Unlike Sakayanagi, who’s kept her at just the right distance since the beginning, I want to groom Yamamura over this coming year into a more useful asset. The first step is taking care of her mental state.

I don’t know what Morishita thinks about Yamamura yet, so to be safe, it is better not to discuss this topic further.

“But you? You’re not going to get along with Yamamura?”

Ever since I transferred to Class C, I haven't once seen Morishita and Yamamura talk. Yet Yamamura often glances at Morishita or looks restless. So it's not that she doesn't want contact with her.

"She shouldn't get too entangled with me. She'll get dragged into deep karmic sins. With someone that delicate, sooner or later, she'll just wither away..."

"I have no idea what you mean. Wait, so if I get dragged in, I'm fine?"

"Ayanokoji Kiyotaka is different. You seem like you can take a beating."

Her reasoning isn't entirely wrong, but I still felt a little reluctant about it.

"You two didn't start the discussion before I got back, did you?"

Hashimoto came over in a hurry, carrying three cups and placing them in the center of the table.

"Don't worry, the discussion is already over."

"That's great. Let's start from the beginning then. First, let's reconfirm the exam details."

Hashimoto got straight to the point as soon as he sat down, clearly knowing Morishita's statement was a lie. He showed us the special exam's rules on his phone.

"I'll just listen quietly from the side, so go ahead."

With that, Morishita stuck her straw into her matcha latte, letting us know she was just there to listen.

“All right. Let me share my thoughts first. Honestly, I didn’t expect them to start our third year with another one-on-one style special exam. We just had something like that at the end of last term.” Hashimoto shared his honest impression.

Given the unfamiliarity of the environment in a new class, starting this way wasn't necessarily bad.

“Yeah. And they separated the upper classes and lower classes clearly this time. It seems like they considered the condition of our overall grade in making that decision.”

It has its pros and cons. It's an excellent chance to close the gap between the upper and lower classes, but also a chance for that gap to grow even bigger.

“As for me, I’m just glad we didn’t have to go for the ‘unstable alliance’ scheme in our first exam of the year— if we had, there would have been pushback in class, and even if we pulled it off, we would be taking a huge risk from the get-go. Just the thought of it scares me.”

I can see where he’s coming from, but ignoring it forever isn’t an option. Our class is bound to clash with Ichinose’s class eventually.

Personally, I actually thought a direct confrontation right from the start would have been better. Our overall academic ability surpasses theirs, and coupled with my recent transfer, deliberately losing to Ichinose under these circumstances could have served as an abnormality to

throw off Horikita and Ryuen, creating a shock factor for them. It's only a small thing, but I feel the current situation is a bit of a missed opportunity.

If it is not just a simple defeat, but a meaning is given to the defeat, then it will be valuable.. We can turn a lost battle into future wins.

While we were talking, more people began filing into the cafe. The first-year boy and girl from before seemed to have ordered. Now holding iced coffees, they chose the table next to ours and sat down.

“For me, the exam details don’t really matter.”

Morishita soon got fed up with the awkward silence, chewing on her straw as she spoke. She was chewing it so much that the end had visibly flattened.

“Hey, if you really don’t care, why’d you come along?”

“Because Hashimoto Masayoshi’s little outburst had me curious. I was worried Ayanokoji Kiyotaka might struggle because of it. I mean, someone went and made a big declaration in front of the class without even asking permission. Is that really okay? Giving the penalty points effectively to opponents, while dodging any blowback on our side, is an ideal strategy but not easy to pull off. The other side is definitely thinking about the same things and will come up with countermeasures.”

Strong students can rack up high scores, but they also become prime targets for penalty points. Meanwhile, weak students aren’t likely to get penalty points, but you can’t expect a high score from them either.

“Don’t sweat it, Morishita. Things will work out. Like Shimazaki said, Our class’s academic strength is way better. Even if we get hit with some penalty points, we’ll still be on top. And missing a few guesses here and there is inevitable. But As long as we win this exam, Ayanokoji will remain our leader.”

Aiming for a 100% hit rate of penalty points or complete evasion is practically impossible.

It’s like flipping a coin— there’s no such thing as a 100% certainty. No matter how deeply you think about it, certainty might approach 100% but it will never actually reach it.

Of course, unforeseen factors—like an internal leak—could change things. If we were first-years, maybe then..., but as third-years now, that kind of wishful scenario is nearly impossible.

“As long as we don’t miss all our guesses, we can reap huge rewards from winning. Nobody’s going to vote you down right from the start, they’ll be willing to see how it goes next time. That said, we do at least need to guess a few of the people chosen for the minority battle... Right, nailing three of them would be ideal if we want to make a statement.”

If we miss them all, Shimazaki and the doubters won’t be convinced.

“Yeah, that’s the thing. Seeing through the enemy’s thought process is huge, we can’t ignore it.”

Only five students can participate in the minority battle, and you start with 100 free penalty points. If you plan to assign 20 penalty points to

each, that means you have to place bets on those five. But out of the forty people in the opposing class, guessing three correctly is less than a 1% chance. That's why being able to judge people is such a significant part of the minority battle.

“But getting three right sounds too difficult. I think two is plenty.”

Hashimoto seemed fine with just catching a couple, as long as they could force changes in the doubters' minds. He made it sound easy, but even if we assigned penalty points to all five, the probability of exactly two hits is still under 10%.

That's definitely not high.

“Easy to say when you're leaving it to someone else. I want to hear what Ayanokoji Kiyotaka thinks. With no clear leads, how do you plan to predict who they'll pick?”

“It's not time to talk about that yet. If I casually throw ideas around, and they get taken at face value, it'll be trouble for both of us.”

“Oh wow, going on the defensive so fast, huh? At this rate, the future looks grim.”

“I won't deny it. But if there's anything else on your mind, let's hear it.”

I turned the discussion back to Hashimoto, who nodded with enthusiasm. He was probably hoping something he said might spark a good plan in me.



“All right, let’s assume we aim to catch two. Personally, I think we should expand the target list and distribute our 100 penalty points among ten people. If we only focus on the five who’ll do the minority battle and we’re off the mark, we’re in trouble. And in our class’s case, I think just a ten-point lead is enough. We have a solid chance of winning. The other class only has a handful of people who could turn things around.”

He’s right: the other side doesn’t have many who can achieve a B+ or above academically— including Kaneda, Hiyori, Katsuragi— fewer than six total.

“If we’re not confident, that might indeed be best.”

“So Morishita agrees?”

“Yes, it’s the most basic approach.”

“Also, we shouldn’t ignore defense. We have to decide who’s going into the minority battle. Do you have an idea of class ranking for academics?”

“I’ve got a rough idea from OAA and what I’ve seen these past two years.”

“Okay. I’ll fill you in later on some of my own observations over these last couple of years. Just treat it as a reference.”

“That’d be great. I don’t really know the specifics of who’s better or worse at what.”

Even if it doesn't directly help with this exam, it should save time down the line.

“Now, about who we choose for the minority battle— I'm not against doing something unexpected like choosing a few unexpected students, but overall, I'm inclined to pick the top scorers.”

“Oh? Morishita, so you're prepared to take some penalty points?”

“If we tried to play it safe and purposely picked weaker or mid-tier students, and the enemy guessed that. What then? Things could get dicey. On the flip side, if we exploit the idea that ‘they'd never send in top scorers,’ we might catch them off guard.”

Hashimoto propped an elbow on the table, looking like he was warming to the idea. But he still had a different take.

“I still say we should put out some weaker students. Anyone who's obviously top-tier will be targeted first. If it were me, even if I'm not sure I'd guess right, I would pour penalty points on those top students. Actually, I might even go all in and slap huge penalties solely on the top scorers.”

They're polar opposites on how best to handle the minority battle. But they both have valid reasons.

Realistically, you can only pick among three categories right from the start: High-level students, low-level students, or something balanced in between.

“And there's something else to keep in mind, right? Like purchasing additional penalty points to expand the attack range. If they decide to

target twenty or thirty people, that'd be a real headache.”

“You mean the so-called ‘money bomb’? With Ryuen, you never know—he might do it.”

If they do guess every single minority participant, that will cover up their disadvantage in one shot.

In this special exam, the ability to purchase penalty points might be the most interesting aspect. If it was purely a matter of academic ability, Ryuen’s class would have no chance of winning.

But add in the scoring of the Whole class battle, the minority battle’s five wins, plus the penalty point mechanic, and it’s not so straightforward.

If they nail who’ll participate in the minority battle, they could bring the matchup to equal footing. With strategic spending of additional penalty points, they could even pull off a total victory.

While for us this is an exam we’re “sure to win,” there’s definitely a chance for unexpected developments.

“If the other side focuses all their penalty points on our top students—like a 20-point penalty on each—that’d be pretty nasty, huh?”

“It will decrease our chances of winning. But they will need a lot of private points to pull off such a crazy tactic.”

A 20-point penalty on each top scorer costs a million private points per person.

There are 12 B+ or higher students in Class C, so even after the free 100 points, that's 7 million more.

“Spending nearly 10 million points only to end up losing? That would make me furious.”

It will be fine if they win, but the risk of failure is huge. In this exam, the higher the potential win rate through spending, the tighter the accompanying funds become, and it will also have an impact on future exams.

“Any idea how Ryuen plans to deal with that? Have you figured out his strategy?”

Hashimoto kept glancing at me like he was expecting some amazing insight.

If I do well in this exam, I'll solidify my position in the class. That's probably why he's pinning his hopes on me.

“Ryuen's strategy, huh...”

I paused for a moment before speaking again.

“I don't know either.”

“...You don't know?”

“What a shame, it seems like Ayanokoji Kiyotaka hasn't had a flash of inspiration yet.”

“There's still time before the exam day. I'll make a winning plan before then.”

“Yeah, as they say *'haste makes waste'* right? After all, Ayanokoji isn't perfect— he's only a human”

*[TL Note: Here an Idiom is used which is a well-known proverb meaning: rushing things can lead to failure or mistakes. It is translated as 'haste makes waste' here for convenience.]*

Hashimoto's words revealed his unease, even though he pretended to be bold about it.

“By the way, I'm not planning on joining the minority battle this time.”

“That's your choice, but are you sure? If you want acceptance from the class, you said earlier you'd prove yourself in a big, direct way when we talked about your transfer. You're not lacking confidence, are you? I mean, your academic level is A, which is pretty rare.”

“Don't you think Ryuen would target me?”

“Well, sure, he probably would...”

“Logically speaking, the other side would figure Ayanokoji Kiyotaka is sure to compete, so they'd definitely hit him with penalty points. One or two points he could shrug off, but if they threw thirty or forty on him, that'd knock him right out of winning range. Not sure if they'd go that far just for one guaranteed point, but still.”

Right. Even if I got a perfect score, having a 40-point penalty would cut me down to 60, an easy win even for Kaneda, Hiyori, or Katsuragi.

“So you think Ryuen will definitely invest a lot of penalty points into you, so you'll just avoid the fight.”

“That’s right. No matter what he says, I’m sure he’ll do it.”

“In that case, not forcing yourself to participate is a good call— let him waste those points.”

“Might be interesting to ask him what he’s thinking when he shows up soon.”

“Huh? ‘Shows up soon’—what do you mean?”

“Ryuen.”

At that, Hashimoto immediately glanced around.

“...He’s not here, though?”

“Not yet. But he’s set things up here, so it’s only a matter of time.”

Hashimoto and Morishita followed my gaze. Komiya and Yamawaki, who’d been watching us, hurriedly looked away, but it was too late.

“They’ve been monitoring us all this time? I guess I never noticed because they were at a distance.”

Hashimoto’s only real worry was whether we’d be overheard.

But by now, that was unavoidable. The first-year boy and girl next to us finished their cafe break and got up. As I watched them go, Morishita tilted her head with a puzzled expression.

“What’s with those two first-year students?”

“Those two just now were also first-years sent by Ryuen.”

“Huh...? Seriously?”

“Yeah. They tried pretty hard to pretend otherwise but set their phone at the edge of the table to secretly record us. They kept it screen-down so that if any messages popped up while they were recording, the screen wouldn’t light up and give them away. Normally, whether you’re a guy or a girl, you’d keep your phone close or check it now and then, but Takikura— that girl— barely looked at hers even when their conversation became silent.”

“Damn it. It hasn't even been that many days, and he's already turned first-years into his pawns...”

“It hasn't even been a week since school started, right? During this time, Ryuen contacted first-years to expand his surveillance network.”

Hashimoto is also quite cautious, but even he didn’t think to watch out for first-years.

“You even know their names, huh? Nice work, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.”

“I only recognized them because OAA shows all the new students’ photos and names using junior high as reference. I skimmed through OAA as soon as it was public.”

“Now that you mention it, those two did seem off. But even so, we can’t be absolutely sure they’re Ryuen’s, right? Maybe it really was just a coincidence she never touched her phone. Or she set it down without thinking. Those scenarios exist.”

“Sure, maybe. But we should plan around them being spies. It’s best to act on that assumption.”

In reality, I do have firm proof, but I'll share that only after the exam. Hashimoto whistled, nodding with satisfaction.

“Morishita, isn't that enough to flag them as suspicious? That's Ayanokoji for you.”

“Don't just praise him. If he's right, that means Ayanokoji Kiyotaka already leaked several bits of information.”

“He only let them hear what he could afford to share. Don't worry about it.”

“Oh, so that ‘I don't know either’ line earlier was your plan, huh? Right, that is the move. It's what I like about you. Since the enemy's right next to us, we can't just spout the truth.”

In a special exam where there's only so much you can do, information itself can be a weapon. Even the smallest clue or hint must be fought for if it could bring victory. That doesn't necessarily mean it'll raise our odds, though.

Recruiting inconspicuous first-years to spy is effective, but ultimately it's not about how much or how little intel you have— it's about how accurate it is. They'll get swamped by a flood of truths and lies, and figuring out which is real is exhausting. Infact, it's downright difficult.

Morishita had drained about half her matcha latte when she lifted her mouth from the straw.

“Looks like they're finally here.”



“Seems so. Let’s stop talking for now. Compared to Horikita’s class, these are the people we really have to watch.”

Hashimoto’s voice had a tinge of tension, and he gave a slightly uneasy smile.

At that moment, Ryuen, Ishizaki, and Albert were walking towards us. It’s been almost a week since the entrance ceremony. Many people, from other classes or other grades, had already asked why I transferred but nobody from Ryuen’s class had come to speak to me, nor had they even looked me in the eye. If anything, they seemed to be deliberately avoiding me. No doubt it was on Ryuen’s orders.

“They probably won't cause trouble in a place like this... at least, I think so. But with Kito not around, it's still a bit unsettling.”

Hashimoto glanced at Morishita uneasily.

He must’ve been worried something might happen. But there was really nothing to fear.

“Stop acting like a wobbly newborn deer, okay? Even if something does happen, I’ll handle it in no time. Don’t let my current appearance fool you— I’m a master of the Ai-chan style of ancient martial arts.”

“...I’m counting on you, then.”

Hashimoto expressed his thanks to the 100% lying Morishita, while simultaneously positioning himself in front of her and me.

“AYANOKOJI!”

A loud, rough voice boomed through the cafe, even echoing across Keyaki Mall.

That was Ishizaki. It seemed he couldn't bear the slow walk over and had simply charged ahead.

“You Bastard! Why the hell did you transfer to Saka— Sorry, I mean, why’d you transfer to Class C?!”

This question had probably been in his mind for a while, and now it burst out.

“Shut up, Ishizaki. You’re disturbing everyone else. Calm down.”

Hashimoto stepped in, blocking Ishizaki’s outstretched hand.

“How am I supposed to calm down?! I—I’ve been—!”

“Move.”

Ryuen, having caught up, grabbed Ishizaki's shoulder and pushed him aside.

People sitting nearby hurriedly moved their seats, afraid they’d get caught in the commotion.

“You’ve ruined the pleasant mood of the cafe, Ryuen. Mind showing some basic courtesy?”

“You're as shamelessly persistent as ever, aren't you? Sakayanagi's gone, so you immediately cozy up to Ayanokoji without hesitation? You'd die instantly if you weren't clinging to someone strong, right?”

“Doing things for the good of the class isn’t such a bad thing, is it?”

“Ha, whatever. Do as you please. More importantly—”

Ryuen turned and gave me a piercing look.

“What are you up to, transferring to Class C?”

“Not much. Sakayanagi left, so Class C asked me to lend a hand, that’s all.”

I looked at Hashimoto, who nodded frantically, as if to say, “That’s right.”

“No, no way. Who’d change classes just because of that?!”

“Shut the hell up for a second, Ishizaki.”

“Ye-yes! Sorry!”

Ryuen grabbed Ishizaki by the collar, making him apologize in a panic.

“Does *you* moving to Class C bother me? Heh. Not at all. If anything, it’s exactly what I wanted. Rather than you staying hidden in the shadows, now you’re leading the class yourself. If I want to defeat you, there’s no better stage.”

Ryuen wasn’t satisfied with me lurking behind Horikita as a puppeteer. Hence this welcoming attitude.

“By the way, Ryuen, don’t you think it’s a bit late to be greeting our class’s new leader?”

“Leader? You’re getting ahead of yourself. Has he been acknowledged as one?”

During this week, he did not slack off in observing Class C. He clearly knew about how Shimazaki and others weren't thrilled to have me, or to let me act as a leader.

“I need to show results, So I'll be counting on you to go easy on me in this special exam.”

“Don't be stupid. This is a perfect chance for me to go head-to-head with you. I'm not gonna hold back, I'll unleash every trick in the book.”

After saying that, Ryuen turned to leave as if he had nothing more to say. He didn't seem inclined to give away any extra hints.

“Ayanokoji! ...Why...? Why Class C...? Damn it...! Argh, well, now that it's happened, there's no point complaining. Let's talk properly some other time.”

Ishizaki was obviously reluctant but had no choice other than to accept. Then he added,

“Also, don't forget to go see Shiina sometime soon. She's not as vocal as me, but she's pretty down too.”

“I was planning to.”

I have been avoiding the library on purpose until Ryuen finally showed up. Once this special exam is over, I'll drop by.

Albert gave me a small wave, then walked off with Ryuen.

“Heh, is that all?”

Morishita sipped up the remaining matcha at the bottom of her cup, acting as if she'd singlehandedly chased Ryuen away.

“You barely said a word, though. Honestly... Anyway, Ryuen's definitely aiming to win this exam. Don't lose, Ayanokoji. Make sure you come up with a good plan. If I hear any new info, I'll bring it to you right away.”

With that, Hashimoto decided it was time to leave. He grabbed his drink and walked out of the cafe.

“Hashimoto Masayoshi really likes to run around, huh? Must be because he's in track and field?”

I doubt that's the reason... probably not.

In fact, Hashimoto isn't even in track and field to begin with.

## Part 3

While Ayanokoji and Ryuen were having their intense conversation in the Keyaki Mall. Kushida left the cafe right after buying a *Café Au Lait*(Coffee with milk).

After Ayanokoji exposed her true personality during the Unanimous Special Exam, her classmates naturally grew distant. The boys didn't seem to care much, but quite a few of the girls distanced themselves from her.

Her alone time suddenly increased. She herself didn't mind, she understood that it couldn't be helped. What Kushida actually liked wasn't being surrounded by people. Rather, she enjoyed the feeling of standing out— being the center of attention.

Of course, the students from other classes and other grades didn't know the truth, so they continued to interact with her as usual. However, she herself had become less inclined to reach out to others first.

Now that more people around her knew her true nature, continuing to act like the sweet, helpful classmate took even more energy. That was one reason.

*Ah, there goes Kushida again, pretending to be a good person.*

No matter how much she tried, irritation swelled toward classmates who would shoot her those knowing, judgmental looks.

Compared to her middle school days, she perceived that both she and those around her had matured considerably— but here they were.

Despite that, she hasn't been able to release her stress lately. If she couldn't relax day after day, she wouldn't even have the energy for a fake smile.

“Tch, what a pain.”

On the way back to the dorms— where there was no one who would eavesdrop and cause problems— Kushida unleashed these spiteful words at the person who caught her eye.

That person was Horikita, sitting on a bench with a gloomy look on her face.







Kushida could have passed by and ignored her, but instead she stopped in front of Horikita. Horikita slowly lifted her head.

“Kushida-san...?”

“Why do you sound unsure? Well, never mind what you’re doing here. You’re probably waiting for an ‘accidental’ run-in with Ayanokoji-kun, right?”

“I’m not.”

“Oh, it’s already obvious. And let’s be real, there’s nothing ‘coincidental’ about this. You one hundred percent look like a lovesick clingy girl.”

Exposed with a single remark, Horikita averted her gaze.

“...Could you just leave me alone?”

“I’d like to, but you look way too miserable. If our class leader is making that face, it’ll definitely bring everyone down.”

After Kushida’s true personality was revealed, she refrained from going after Horikita, whom she hated so much. She stayed in the same class because, if she wanted to graduate from Class A, she needed Horikita around. If Horikita, who carries a crucial role, was depressed, it would lower their chances of making it from Class A. And that wasn’t what Kushida wanted.

“You—”

Horikita was about to say something, but Kushida wasn't looking at her anymore, instead noticing someone approaching from behind. It

was on the route back to the dorms. Ninomiya Yui from Class 3-D happened to be passing by.

“Kushida-san, Horikita-san, see you later!”

“Yeah, see you, Ninomiya-san! Let’s hang out next time!”

Kushida kept smiling until Ninomiya was far away. Horikita also picked up on that and said nothing for the moment.

“Kushida-san, doesn’t it bother you at all that Ayanokoji-kun transferred out?”

“Bother me? Of course it does. Without him, our ‘*on paper strongest*’ class could get obliterated with a single blow, and my path to graduating in Class A looks grim. Plus, he knows my true nature— if he decides it’s necessary, he’ll reveal it to everyone else too.”

Horikita recalled her meeting with Ayanokoji after the opening ceremony. Ayanokoji hadn't hesitated at all to reveal the fact that he and Matsushita had communicated secretly, along with the results of their efforts. So she could fully understand Kushida’s anxiety.

“Then why do you look so calm?”

“I’m just acting calm. It’s like pretending to be a sweet classmate—I’m good at acting composed. Unlike *someone*.”

It seemed like the conversation might drag on. So, Kushida took out the *café au lait* she had planned on drinking back in her room. She sipped it, letting the aroma and sweetness of the coffee spread through her mouth.

“Ugh— so annoying. Do you have to look like that? You already look bad enough, and this is making it worse.”

“I feel like I look the same as usual.”

“Looks like the symptoms are pretty severe.”

Kushida sighed in exasperation. Just as she was about to leave, she remembered something.

“You can sit here wallowing all you want, but would you do something about Ibuki? She’s been a real nuisance these days.”

“...Come to think of it, she’s been calling me non-stop. I’ve lost track of how many times.”

“After you ignored her, she started bugging me to feed her. If I suggest some vegetable set meal, she complains and whines. She’s gotten spoiled by too many fancy meals.”

Before, when Horikita cooked, she would sometimes invite Ibuki and Kushida along. This happened most days of the week before spring break ended, but that stopped completely this last week.

“Right now... sorry. I’m just not up for doing anything.”

“I’m not actually asking you to cook. Anyway, the next special exam is about to start, so hurry up and figure out a strategy. We can’t let Ichinose’s last-place class beat us, can we?”

“That’s easy for you to say. Given our difference in numbers, our class is actually at a disadvantage...”

“So what? Winning despite that is what the class leader is supposed to do, right?”

Horikita knew this was a harsh demand, but she quickly realized: Being at the top means carrying that kind of burden.

“...Yes. I think so too.”

Kushida forced her expression to settle, clearly slipping back into her mask.

“But even if you know that, you probably won’t be able to do anything about it, right? I’m heading back. Go on and wait for him if you want — but even if you wait here, Ayanokoji-kun isn’t going to pay any attention to you.”

Leaving those cold words behind, Kushida walked off with her cup in hand.

Horikita stared quietly at Kushida’s retreating figure for a while. Once she was out of sight, Horikita rose to her feet with a heavy heart. Kushida’s final words were undeniably true.

*“Even if you wait here, Ayanokoji-kun isn’t going to pay any attention to you...”*

Horikita had known that from the start. But hearing Kushida’s remarks made her realize she was just playing the pitiful clingy girl.

Still, Horikita wasn’t ready to move forward. Because the feeling of *"wanting to see him"* wasn't fake in the slightest. She really wanted to see him in person, to talk to him.

“What I wish for... is this... That’s... the only thing I want... nothing else.”

After silently apologizing to Kushida and her classmates, she decided to go back.

## Part 4

Once I returned to my dorm room, I collapsed onto the bed, still in my clothes.

My body felt so heavy.

I'm not sick. But I'm completely drained.

“I need... to think of a strategy for the exam...”

I stared pointlessly at the ceiling. Suddenly, my phone rang.

“Ayanokoji-kun...?!”

I reached out to check the screen.

That flicker of hope disappeared. It said “Ibuki Mio.”

Just like I told Kushida earlier, Ibuki's been contacting me nonstop lately.

All she ever does is squawk, “Feed me!” like a parrot. But I'm in no mood to cook, so I kept refusing. It was probably the same request now.

I glanced at the convenience-store bento on my table, then laid back on the bed.

The phone kept ringing before finally going silent.

I didn't want to think about anything.

I didn't want to accept anything.

I just let time pass by meaninglessly.

Today would end, and when tomorrow came, Ayanokoji-kun still wouldn't be back in our class.

Then my phone vibrated.

*Was it Ibuki again?*

But it was just a short vibration, meaning it was a text message rather than a call.

With faint hope, I picked up my phone.

“Let's discuss what we should do for the upcoming special exam.”

It was from Hirata-kun.

Even though I was in such a hazy state, that message pulled me back to reality just a bit.

Surely the other classes had already begun their preparations for the next special exam.

Meanwhile, I...

All of a sudden, the ceiling warped.

“I... am I crying...?”

I gently wiped the corner of my eye with my index finger.

My fingertip came away suspiciously damp.

“...He made me cry again...”

I didn't know how many times I had sighed by now.

I couldn't control my emotions.

I couldn't calm down.

“Why...”

The word escaped my lips.

I forced myself to speak it aloud, trying to make myself realize that this was reality.

“I don't understand— Is this... really happening?”

It felt disgusting.

*How did it end up like this?*

I still didn't know.

No. I just refused to accept it. I'd been rejecting it all along.

The day I started third year, seeing “Class 3-A” felt like an illusion now.

I could barely remember that instant of excitement and nervousness.

I want to go back to the morning of the entrance ceremony. I want to grab him by the hand and stop him from leaving the class.

*—Please, don't transfer...*

“Thinking about it... is pointless...”

How many times have I thought the same thing?



It's all futile.

Even if heaven made such a miracle happen, Ayanokoji-kun would not stop for even a moment.

If this had been sudden and unplanned, there might have been a small hope.

But... it wasn't.

He had decided this long ago.

*When did it start—?*

I don't know.

A week ago? A month ago? Either way... going back to that entrance ceremony morning wouldn't change anything.

*Help me...*

*Ayanokoji-kun...*

*Help me—*

## Part 5

While Horikita and Kushida were talking on that bench...

Ryuen had summoned Ishizaki, Albert, Katsuragi, and Ibuki to a karaoke room.

It was one of the places they often used for secret class meetings. Everyone's seating was naturally established after meeting there multiple times.

Ishizaki glanced at the menu and pointed at an item called "fried pasta."

"Hey, Ibuki. There's some new fried pasta thing here— could you order it for me?"

"Why should I? Order it yourself."

"My dad once came home from those hostess bars and said this fried pasta was incredible. I wanna try it too."

"Like I care."

"Forget fried pasta for now. Let's talk about the real issue. This special exam isn't simple. No— make that 'also isn't simple.'"

Katsuragi, seated farthest away with his arms folded, urged Ishizaki to get to the point.

"I think we all know that no matter how tough we act, Class B's the worst at academics."

“Man, the thought of studying makes my head hurt.”

Ibuki responded like she had already given up.

If it’s purely academics, their chances were practically zero. This was the biggest weakness of Ryuen’s class.

They had climbed up to Class B not just through ability but with luck on their side. However, the format of this exam was extremely unfavorable, leaving them no obvious way to win. And the opponent this time was the former Class A, known for its academic strength.

“If we want to win, we have to be ready for a tough fight.”

“Might as well just give up, yeah? A hundred class points isn’t that huge.”

“You’re throwing in the towel before we even start, Ibuki?!”

“Then, Ishizaki, can you stay up 24 hours straight cramming for the exam? Even if you do, I doubt you’d reach a score high enough to close the gap.”

“Ugh... well... yeah, that’s tough, but still...”

“You don’t normally study at all. You probably haven’t even looked at the materials I prepared.”

“School’s already enough of a pain. Why do I have to do extra assignments from you, Katsuragi?”

“It’s for the class. The truth is, those who actually did them really improved academically.”

Katsuragi emphasized the results, and Ishizaki awkwardly looked away.

“I’m barely managing a passing grade as it is. Trying to go even higher would blow my brain apart!”

Seeing Ishizaki’s attitude, Katsuragi sighed, then turned his gaze to Ryuen.

“Shouldn’t you give them tougher orders? If you do, Ishizaki and the others might take this more seriously.”

“Idiots stay idiots. And it’s not our style to take on the enemy in their strongest area. I’ve never planned to beat them head-on.”

From the start, Ryuen had rejected any plans which had low odds of success.

“The other side is formidable. Even without Sakayanagi, Class A still has plenty of strong academic students. We can’t expect their scores to drop.”

The moment he said that, Ishizaki, who had been half-listening, suddenly stood up with clenched fists.

“‘Their scores to Drop’ nah. With Ayanokoji there, it’s a huge power-up. Damn it, why would he transfer to Class C...? I don’t get the point at all. Ibuki, do you get it?”

“Why are you asking me? There’s no reason to figure out what he’s thinking.”

Things always get complicated the moment Ayanokoji comes into picture. Ibuki had learned that firsthand and basically tried to stay clear of him. She even refused on the spot when they went to the cafe.

Thanks to that, her mental health's intact, and she's been relatively calm. Well, except for those unexpected run-ins...

“Ugh, he feels like a major new threat...”

“If he wasn't, that would've been disappointing. My ultimate target is him, after all.”

A powerful foe is precisely what motivates Ryuen.

Ishizaki, knowing that was how Ryuen rolled, closed his mouth and nodded.

“Honestly, I'm still on the fence. Of course, I don't deny that Ayanokoji is calm and sometime displays sharp insight—he does have impressive qualities. But something about him feels... like he is a bit slow and absent-minded. That makes him hard to hate. I don't see him as someone who surpasses Sakayanagi.”

“That's just because you haven't seen what he can do, Katsuragi. He's terrifying. Right, Ibuki?”

“Stop dragging me into this. Talking about that guy is more infuriating than anything. I hate him from the bottom of my heart.”

“Between him and Horikita, whom you're always complaining about, who do you hate more?”

“That’s... a tough question. It’s like choosing whether to gouge out my left eye or my right.”

“That’s a scary comparison.”

Ryuen stared at the ceiling, ignoring the pointless conversation between the two beside him.

Then Katsuragi turned to Ishizaki.

“So what’s going on with Ayanokoji and Hashimoto’s group? Any talk about why he switched classes?”

“There’s no real change at all. It’s like he couldn’t care less about being in Class A or Class C. He says he transferred because Class C asked him for help, but who knows if that’s true.”

“Could it be that he thinks becoming the leader will let him do whatever he wants?”

“With Sakayanagi gone, that leader spot is open... But from what I’ve seen, Ayanokoji’s the type who operates quietly without saying much, finishing things behind the scenes.”

Recalling his own impressions of Ayanokoji, Katsuragi asked Ryuen.

“What do you think?”

“Meh, I don’t care why he transferred or why he’s stepping into the spotlight.”

It seemed Ryuen had sorted out his thoughts, and he looked at Katsuragi again.

“This special exam— if we tackle it normally, we’ll lose 99% of the time, whether Ayanokoji is there or not. But the rules aren’t airtight. If we use the ‘bullet’ of our private points, we can open a path.”

“You mean you plan on pouring in all the private points you’ve saved?”

“They must’ve spent a fortune to bring him over. And since they’re confident in academics, they’ll probably try to win with minimal spending. That’s our chance.”

From Ryuen’s perspective, Class C couldn’t afford to spend big. They couldn’t conjure points out of thin air. Instead, they’d rely on raw academic power to shrug off any penalty points.

“I understand your logic, but the difference in our academic abilities can’t be bridged by a few penalty points. We’d have to assign penalty points to dozens of their students just to have a shot. That’s not exactly an efficient tactic. We have no clue which five they’ll pick for the minority battle.”

“So you’re against it?”

“Not necessarily. I’m just saying don’t make a half-hearted investment. If you want a decent chance of beating them... as unrealistic as it sounds, you’d need to buy around 300 penalty points. That alone is 15 million private points.”

“What? Fifteen million just to have a shot?!”

“And even that doesn’t guarantee victory, Ishizaki. If we spread that many penalties across their entire class, each person would get 10

points off. Meanwhile, if the enemy uses the free 100 points strictly on five people, that's 20 points each. For every one of our actual participants they guess correctly, it is equivalent to losing 10 penalty points. The probability of this happening is very low, but we should always be prepared for the worst."

Even if they spent a ton, there was no guarantee they'd secure a lead. A single miscalculation could mean all those private points go down the drain. That was what Katsuragi was worried about, and he continued:

"To increase our chances further, we'd have to add another ten or twenty million. Or we'd focus about 20 points each on the main threats in their class— but I wouldn't call that a reliable strategy either."

"If we mess up, we could go bankrupt before we even start."

"Exactly. If you're willing to shoulder that kind of risk because you still want to win, then I won't stop you. But if we do this, we can't afford to fail."

It was definitely a difficult task.

Ibuki, who'd been listening with half-interest, now turned to Ryuen:

"Why not just give up on this exam?"

"Hey, Ibuki! How dare you challenge Ryuen-san's decision?!"

"Huh? Didn't he call me here to hear my opinion? If not, I'll leave."

As Ibuki made a move to go, Ryuen laughed.



“I’m listening. Why do you say give up?”

“It’s just too unfavorable. Like Katsuragi said, academically, we don’t stand a chance. We might be able to gamble with private points, but the payoff doesn’t look worth it. The fact I find it reckless is proof enough.”

“I agree with Ibuki. The cost and reward don’t match. Even shutting them out entirely might not make up for it.”

Katsuragi nodded at Ibuki’s statement.

“Hmph, if you’re only looking at the immediate reward, yeah.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“From our point of view, losing this exam is practically guaranteed. Conversely, that means they believe they absolutely can’t afford to lose. They’re convinced they’ll win, but that conviction also increases their internal pressure. If by some chance they actually lose, the shock will be enormous— like nothing they’ve felt before.”

“So you want to throw cold water on Ayanokoji’s ‘debut’? You think an upset will really inflict that much damage on them?”

“It would. I experienced something similar firsthand on that rooftop.”

Ryuen tapped his fists together with a sharp glint in his eyes.

Arrogance, the violence of a ruler, an unyielding heart— Ryuen once believed he’d ultimately triumph no matter what. But Ayanokoji, single handedly confronting him in his own lair, was on a different

level entirely. Ryuen's notion of "absolute" had been shattered both physically and mentally. It took him a long time to come back from that low point.

"Class C— including Ayanokoji— doesn't believe losing is an option. But that fear of 'what if' still exists deep down. That alone makes our fight worthwhile. As for Ayanokoji's transfer, if we can ruin his debut, we'll earn far more than the actual reward points."

Besides, even if the reward is only 100 points, the resulting increase in class points cannot be ignored. There's a considerable gap between Ayanokoji's Class C and both Ryuen's and Horikita's classes. Considering Class C's situation where they can't afford a meaningless defeat, denying them the chance to gain class points is a significant achievement in itself.

They didn't have much time left in their remaining school life to drag things out.

"But you need at least 15 million to have a chance, right... That's too high..."

Ishizaki waved his fingers in shock at the size of the sum.

"Ordinarily, that alone would give us decent odds. But Ayanokoji can easily imagine that we would risk everything. Even if we win by brute-forcing penalty points, it might not be a perfect victory— and that's acceptable enough."

Plus, you can't use penalty points in the group battles, so they will effectively start with two wins.

“Right... I get what you’re saying, but the risk is huge.”

Just as Katsuragi said, Ryuen himself understood this.

If Ryuen had no hesitation, he wouldn’t have bothered calling them here to discuss it.

*Accept the special exam or forfeit it?*

They had to decide which path to take.

Katsuragi glanced at Ryuen, who still hadn’t made up his mind, then shifted his gaze to Ibuki.

“How’s Horikita doing?”

“Huh? Why ask me?”

“You mentioned that until recently, you often ate at Horikita’s place. Even I know you dropped by there a lot. Has she pulled herself together now?”

“Nope. Even if I show up, she won’t let me in. She looks completely miserable, holed up like she’s ready to shut out the world.”

Ibuki confirmed that even a week after Ayanokoji’s transfer, Horikita hadn’t improved.

“I see. She’ll struggle in the special exam if she can’t keep her head straight.”

“Great. Let her fail hard.”

“That’s harsh. Aren’t you two friends? Isn’t it a bit cold to just stand by?”

“Ha? I’m definitely not friends with her.”

“Though it’s unkind, if Class A crumbles now, that’s good news for us. Even if Ichinose’s class wins once or twice, it’s no real threat.”

For Katsuragi, that was the one good reason they might need to go all-in. If they exchange wins back and forth, they might eventually surpass Class A.

After some more small talk, Ryuen suddenly downed the remaining water in his glass in one gulp.

“—I’ve made up my mind on how we’ll fight.”

“So you are going all in?”

Katsuragi interpreted it as meaning that Ryuen was prepared to throw all his private points into this exam.

“What do you think is most important for Ayanokoji in this exam?”

“Obviously getting his first win.”

“Exactly. He squeezed money out of the Class C students, wanting to take Sakayanagi's place as the leader and do as he pleases. But the class students aren't idiots. They won't bet everything on someone who hasn't shown any results. So Ayanokoji has to win, and victory in this exam is expected for them. That makes failure even less acceptable. In a sense, this is his first, and also his last, chance.”

“Yeah. If the person who just took the leadership role, loses right away, then he’s just dog shit.”

Ibuki and Ishizaki both nodded. They shared that view.

“So you want to sink Class C’s hope in a single shot.”

“No matter how favored he is, Ayanokoji won’t be careless— he’ll come at us seriously. His thinking is on another level, which is really infuriating. Even if we try to hide who we’ll pick for the minority battle, he might still guess all five correctly.”

But if Ryuen just chose randomly with dice, it’d be impossible for Ayanokoji to figure it out. Still, given Ayanokoji’s uncanny instincts, it felt like he’d somehow manage anyway.

“He might also use whatever few points they have left to buy more penalty points.”

“In that case, it’ll become a showdown of who’s got more points to burn.”

“And we also have to prevent any leaks about our picks.”

“Yeah, they’ll definitely try spying. Honestly, I can’t even imagine what he’ll do.”

Ishizaki’s near-whisper made Ryuen wonder strongly about something: There weren’t many exploitable holes in this special exam’s rules. Ryuen didn’t think Ayanokoji would hesitate to break the rules if necessary, but the methods he could think of himself were all dangerous just to attempt.

Since his side was at a severe academic disadvantage, Ayanokoji didn't need to take those risks. All they really needed was correct intel on who Ryuen would pick.

“First of all, we need to watch out for Hashimoto— and especially Yamamura.”

At Katsuragi's words, Ryuen nodded lightly.

“Yamamura? Is that even someone in Class C?”

Ibuki tilted her head, as she didn't recall the name.

“Heh, go ahead, Ayanokoji— just try to steal my intel.”

As for who they'd assign penalty points to, there wasn't a 1% chance Ryuen would slip up.

Ayanokoji wouldn't be able to guess. If he managed, he'd be practically a prophetic.

Ryuen was certain it couldn't be done. Yet even so, he felt unease... and a flicker of anticipation.

He wanted to see if Ayanokoji could achieve the impossible once again.

“Fine, Ryuen. I'll act according to your plan.”

With that said, and noting there was no time to lose, Katsuragi prepared to leave the karaoke room. He had made massive contributions to boosting the class's academic abilities, so he felt a strong responsibility for an exam centering on academics.

Watching Katsuragi's back as he was leaving, Ryuen—

## Chapter 6: School Life in Class C

At last, Sunday arrived.

Today, I planned to spend time with my new classmates so we could build a good relationship. I had arranged to meet Yoshida and Shiraishi. Shiraishi was apparently bringing a friend along, though I didn't ask who.

We agreed to meet at 10:30 am. So after getting ready, I left my room about fifteen minutes early. Our meeting spot was the dorm entrance, a very standard choice.

When I reached the lobby, I saw Yoshida already there, looking restless.

“Hey, hey! You're early, Ayanokoji.”

“You are too, Yoshida.”

“Well, I'm a gentleman. I don't want to keep a lady waiting.”

“From the sound of it, it seems like you've been here a while.”

“No way. Only since around 9:30.”

That's still pretty early, a whole hour in advance. He must have very strong feelings for Shiraishi.

However, I doubt whether waiting an hour early would actually improve her impression of him. Even if he deliberately pointed it out,



the conversation would likely turn awkward. Repeating something like this wouldn't leave much of an impression.

Before, I probably wouldn't have been able to smoothly process things related to first impressions like this. In fact, I do feel that dating Karuizawa helped me grow in how I think about and understand these things.

But in romance, there's no absolute right answer. Figuring out the best approach for a given person remains challenging.

“Do you like Shiraishi?”

From my perspective, it certainly seemed so. She herself seemed to think so, too. But I wanted to confirm.

“Huh!? N-no way I like her! Where'd that come from?!”

I see. So that means he *does* like her.

Saying “I don't like her” while obviously agitated is effectively an admission, while a simple nod could mean the opposite. In normal speech that doesn't hold true, but in romance, it does. This is a simple, classic example.

“I just wanted to check.”

“D-does that mean you... Do you like Shiraishi? Don't tell me you broke up with Karuizawa and transferred just to— Damn, so that's it?!”

Even though he's insisting he doesn't like Shiraishi, he looked far from calm and was practically glaring at me. He probably didn't

realize he was being that obvious and just overthinking things.

“Unfortunately, I have no such intention.”

“Y-you don’t have to lie to me, all right? It’s none of my business. You and Shiraishi can, uh... do what you want!”

Yoshida tried acting nonchalant, but he was nowhere close. He kept digging himself deeper, yet I had to continue the conversation.

“No need. More importantly, I wanted to ask about the class.”

“...Still putting up a front. Well, fine. You just transferred in, so you’re bound to have questions. Since you specifically sought me out, I guess I’ll— Wait, why not ask Hashimoto? He thinks highly of you, and he’d probably tell you everything, even random stuff.”

“There are some things I can’t discuss with Hashimoto.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like Hashimoto’s standing in class, how everyone views him, and how they feel about him. It’s hard for him to be objective about that part.”

Even if Hashimoto has a strong grasp of class affairs, he probably can’t analyze himself objectively or give me a totally accurate report.

“So people’s opinions of Hashimoto, huh... Well, to be honest, he gets more negative feedback than positive. I personally find him pretty useful though.”

While Yoshida was sharing his thoughts, his eyes drifted toward the lobby. At the same time, a bright, cheerful voice called out to us:

“Good morning, Yosshi and Ayanokoji-kun!”

The person who appeared was... Nishikawa Ryoko, not Shiraishi. I assumed she just happened to see us and came over to say hi, but she stopped right in front of us.

“Looking forward to hanging out today!”

“Tch, it’s you, Nishikawa...”

“Hey, don’t act so disgusted!”

“You’re with Shiraishi?”

“Yup! What, did you think you’d get to go out with Asuka alone?”

“I don't think this is a date.”

While I was hoping to deepen friendships and expand my social circle, I wasn’t looking for what Nishikawa implied.

“Eh? Really? Calling someone out excitedly on a day off usually means you hope for something more, right? Especially you, Yosshi. I bet that’s what you’re hoping for!”

“N-not at all! Don’t make assumptions!”

Yoshida— well, you could certainly say he had that intention.

“Anyway, Yosshi, as a fellow classmate, let me give you some advice.”

“Wh-what?”

“As for Asuka, you should just give up. And that goes for you too, Ayanokoji-kun.”

Nishikawa stepped closer, glanced around, then lowered her voice:

“Asuka’s *‘experience level’* isn’t ordinary, you know?”

Experience level? What does that mean?

“Huh...? E-experience level?”

Yoshida seemed just as confused as I was, but then he realized something.

“You must have heard of ‘Asuka the Hundred-Man Slayer.’ You’ve at least come across that nickname, right?”

“...Is that rumor...true...?”

“Absolutely. A lie wouldn’t spread this far.”

For some reason, Yoshida looked devastated. I still wasn’t sure what the nickname meant.

“So it’s not about a hundred friends?”

“Eh? A hundred friends? What?”

“No, never mind.”

So it really was completely unrelated...

I still remembered Morishita’s cryptic mention of that phrase earlier.

“‘Hundred-Man Slayer’ means she’s had that kind of relationship with a hundred different guys. She’s super cute and has this indescribably sexy vibe, right?”

*‘That kind of relationship...’*

She was being vague, but probably it meant something very intimate.

It seemed my new neighbor was vastly more experienced in romance than me.

“Yosshi, Do you really think you can score with someone like Asuka?”

“I told you I’m not interested!”

“In that case... Let me think. Maybe if you drop to your knees and beg, you might enjoy one night of bliss?”

“...R-really?”

“Oho? Didn’t you just say you weren’t interested?”

Nishikawa sure seemed to enjoy messing with people. If I had to compare her to someone, it would probably be Amasawa.

“What happens if the total goes to two hundred? Does she become the Two-Hundred-Man Slayer?”

I asked purely out of curiosity. Nishikawa’s eyes widened.

“Ayanokoji-kun, contrary to your appearance, you say some interesting things, don't you?.”

“Do I? I was genuinely curious, that’s all.”

“Then I guess the answer’s no.”

“I see. It doesn't seem to have a very good ring to it, does it?”

“That's not it... It's like, 100 people is impressive enough? The point is the prestige it gives.”

Prestige, huh. So, in romance, that kind of advantage also has an influence.

“...Ugh, I’m already exhausted and it’s barely past waking up. I’ll go sit down and wait.”

Yoshida walked off to a nearby bench, looking deflated, perhaps from using up his morning energy. Nishikawa watched him with amusement, then turned to me.

“Any guy who learns Asuka’s rumor is true typically has one of two reactions: Either they’re shocked by the number and back off in despair, or they get fired up at the idea of being number 101— totally pervy, if you ask me. I wonder which Yosshi will end up being? As for you, Ayanokoji-kun, right now you don’t seem like either type. But how do you really feel?”

“I guess I feel respect for her, if anything. She’s our age, yet managed to do that with a hundred people. It’s honestly kind of amazing.”

“Eh? You really think that? ...You do seem genuine about it.”

“I believe any specialist in any field deserves respect, don’t they? It might be inappropriate to use examples from my previous class, but

it's like in my old class, someone excelling in basketball like Sudo, or swimming like Onodera, or sewing like Inogashira.”

“Hmm, I don’t know about the sewing part, but this is kind of different. Actually, that’s not all. You personally chose to transfer into a lower-ranked class, so you definitely have some unusual ways of thinking, Ayanokoji-kun.”

Even though I honestly meant that as praise for Shiraishi’s “Hundred-Man Slayer” story, it apparently made Nishikawa look at me differently. Her smile wavered a bit, and I felt some slight tension.

“...Wait, hold on.”

She pursed her lips, seeming to think something over.

“Hey as a special favor, want me to tell you something good, Ayanokoji-kun? It will be just between us.”

Nishikawa leaned in with a mischievous smirk.

“There's actually a significant reason why Asuka, the so-called 'Hundred-Man Slayer', agreed to hang out with you, Ayanokoji-kun”

“A significant reason?”

The way she put it piqued my curiosity.

I flashed back to the day of the entrance ceremony. Morishita had apparently chosen my seat, and Shiraishi Asuka ended up next to me. If she and Morishita were in on something together...?

“Could you lean your ear a bit? I don’t want Yosshi overhearing.”

“Sure.”

Because of our height difference, I stooped so she could whisper in my ear.

“Asuka says she wouldn’t mind making you her 101st. Just for fun, no emotional attachment. How about it? Excited?”

She said it like she was revealing a secret, but I doubted its credibility.

“What’s her motive?”

“No deeper meaning. Just a simple boy-meets-girl thing, having *fun* together, that’s all.”

“I’m sorry, but if that’s true, I have to refuse.”

“Wh-why?”

“If what you said about Shiraishi is true, word could spread from either you or her. It wouldn’t take long for our classmate Yoshida to hear about it. That would become a hindrance as I fight alongside Class C from now on.”

After I replied, I put some distance between myself and Nishikawa.

Nishikawa narrowed her eyes. She looked like she wasn’t pleased with my refusal.

“I guess I need to reassess how I see you, Ayanokoji-kun.”

She’d been acting like she was just messing with the new transfer student, but now I saw genuine dissatisfaction and maybe a hint of hostility in her eyes.



“Good morning.”

Right then, the person we’d been waiting for— Shiraishi— appeared in the lobby at almost the exact agreed time.

“Good Morning~ Asuka!”

Nishikawa reverted to her earlier playful self, that hint of negativity was instantly gone.

Even Yoshida, who’d been sulking on the bench, hurried over.

Nishikawa greeted us all again, standing beside Shiraishi.



西川が白石の隣に立つと改めてこう挨拶する。

「改めて、今日はよろしくね綾小路くん。ついでにヨッシーも」

「俺はついだよ」



“Let me say it officially: pleased to be hanging out with you today, Ayanokoji-kun. And... you too, Yosshi.”

“I’m just an afterthought, huh?”

It looked like learning the dynamics within this class might be more complicated than I first thought.

At Nishikawa’s suggestion, we headed to the karaoke place in Keyaki Mall.

We settled into an L-shaped seating arrangement: from the inside out, Shiraishi, Nishikawa, me and then Yoshida.

“Let’s start singing right away!”

Nishikawa handed the microphone to Yoshida without even glancing at the food menu.

“Huh? Why me first? Doesn’t the new guy— Ayanokoji— usually go first?”

“That’d be abuse of power, you know— forcing the new guy to do it. You’re our opener, Yosshi, set an example.”

“Ugh... I’m not that into singing...”

With Yoshida acting reluctant, Nishikawa leaned in and whispered something in his ear. Suddenly, he slapped both hands to his cheeks and straightened up.

“I- I definitely like singing! I’ll do the first one!”

It was pretty obvious what Nishikawa had said to motivate him, but in any case, his spirits lifted considerably.

While Yoshida browsed the song list, Nishikawa asked me to swap seats. Once we did, Shiraishi immediately scooted in close to me, leaving barely any space between our clothes.

“I haven’t gotten to talk much with you yet, Ayanokoji-kun.”

“Your seat is right next to mine at school, so it’s easy to do that anytime, right?”

“I don’t feel calm at school— there’s always something going on.”

Yoshida’s off-key yet enthusiastic singing echoed in the room. Meanwhile, Nishikawa clapped along, raising the energy.

“It’s kind of hard to call this a calm environment, right now.”

Between guys and girls, there’s usually some distance of personal space— but Shiraishi disregarded that, moving close.

*Was this one of the techniques of Shiraishi the 'Hundred-Man Slayer'?*

“Ryoko-san is my best friend.”

“I can tell you two are close. I often see you together during breaks or lunchtime.”

When the first song ended, the karaoke room fell silent for a moment.

“Hey, you two over there! What are you whispering about sitting so close together!?”

“Your singing was great, Yoshida-kun. Why don’t you do another?”

“Huh? It was? In that case— Wait, but you two—!”

“All right, Yosshi~, onto song number two!”

Nishikawa grabbed him by the arm before he could even put the microphone down. He couldn’t escape.

“Since we’re in the same class now, how about exchanging contact info?”

“That is indeed necessary.”

We took out our phones and confirmed we could call and text each other.

“You can contact me anytime, okay?”

From the warmth in Shiraishi’s tone, the gentle vibe in her words, I sensed she was kind and caring.

*But were these lines coming from her heart?*

“What’s on your mind?”

“I’m wondering why you’re treating me so kindly. Most people— like Shimazaki— are just keeping their distance and waiting to see how things go.”

“Well, we sit right next to each other. Plus, that morning when it was just the two of us, that felt like fate to me.”

“I wouldn’t call it fate...”

“You might not think so, Ayanokoji-kun, but I genuinely feel that way.”

With that, Shiraishi moved a bit closer where Yoshida couldn’t see and lightly touched my hand.

“You’ve got long fingers and neat nails. A really nice set of hands.”

“Excuse me, please let go. Yoshida might misunderstand our relationship if he sees us.”

After I said that, Shiraishi seemed slightly surprised, then slowly released her grip.

“You really are interesting, Ayanokoji-kun.”

Perhaps it was better not to take what Nishikawa said about Shiraishi's behavior towards the opposite sex too seriously.

At a glance, her actions certainly seemed seductive, but there was no such feeling in her eyes.

She looked at me more like a researcher examining an fascinating test subject, like observing a lab mouse in a cage.

At least, that was the impression I got.



## Part 1

After I transferred classes, my relationships gradually began to change. But in school life, some things remain the same. Namely, the classroom lessons.

Students generally stay quietly focused, switching their gaze between their tablets and the large display most of the time while working on their assignments. The teacher changes depending on the subject, but for each class, the scene looks about the same.

With the special exam coming up, everyone seems a bit more serious about studying. The material itself isn't anything special— It's more like reviewing content I went through years ago, refreshing my memory.

If there's one area this Class C is currently stronger than Horikita's class, it's that they study more efficiently with a tighter pace.

Naturally, people differ in how quickly they can absorb knowledge. In Horikita's class, when students like Ike or Hondo run into something they don't understand, they'll interrupt the lecture to ask the teacher questions. It's common for the teacher to be stopped numerous times.

On the other hand, in Class C, the students generally have a stronger desire to learn, absorb knowledge faster, and more have mastered effective study methods, allowing lessons to proceed very smoothly. They have a solid academic foundation, creating a virtuous cycle that raises everyone's academic skills.

And today was finally a self-study period where one could catch a breath and slack off a bit.

Since there were no patrolling teachers nearby, students were chatting quietly here and there— but even then, most of the talk centered on the assignments.

Horikita's class has grown a lot over the last two years, but academically, they still lag behind Class C, which is understandable—

*Hmm? Something feels off.*

*Is it my imagination?*

That thought popped into my mind, but I still sensed a small, recurring feeling of unease.

*Just a tiny bit, but it kept repeating.*

It was something strange... right?

*What was that? Wasn't it just my imagination?*

I stopped writing on my tablet. Because, although very slight, that strange sensation kept repeating. Just barely noticeable.

The first time, I thought it might be just a puff of air. But that wasn't it. It clearly happened multiple times, in random spots on my hair, giving me this strange sensation. Trying to figure out the cause, I slowly turned around.

“Is there a problem?”



Morishita, who was staring at me intently, whispered so quietly I could barely hear.

Like me, she held a pen in her hand, looking as if she was focused on her assignment.

“No, nothing...”

“Please don’t turn around during class. Even for self-study, that’s what bad students do. Just do your work properly.”

It was a perfectly sound argument, impossible to refute.

Anyway, the strange feeling in my hair disappeared when I turned around, so maybe it was best not to overthink it. I faced forward and resumed work on my tablet. But just then—

I had barely started writing again when that odd sensation returned, something tugging lightly at my hair. If there’s a culprit, it can only be Morishita behind me.

This time, I turned around faster than before. And just for an instant, Morishita’s face showed an “uh-oh” expression, and she was clearly holding something in her left palm. I couldn’t see exactly what it was, unfortunately.

“Staring at my face from up close? You’re a total pervert.”

“That’s not what I was trying to do at all. By the way— are you doing something to the back of my head?”

I saw no choice but to ask directly.

“No. I’m just doing my assignment like I should.”

She tapped her pen on her tablet a couple of times, but that only made her behavior more suspicious.

And indeed, even if it’s self-study, class time is class time—I can’t just turn around freely whenever I please. Still, something was definitely happening.

Although Morishita was playing dumb, I sensed from my classmates’ glances that the situation was more complicated— some of them looked at me with sympathy and pity.

“Shiraishi.”

“Hehe, yes? What is it?”

I called to the girl seated next to me. She couldn’t hold back her laughter, covering her mouth as she giggled.

“Did Morishita do something?”

“Um... I wouldn’t know.”

Her outright lie only confused me further. But it also told me that I’d have to handle this myself. All right then—

I pretended to give up and turned back around. Then I picked up my pen and continued working on my assignment. Of course, I didn’t stare intently at the tablet. Morishita had to know I was trying to catch her red-handed. She would guess I was on guard. But that was fine.

She knew I had figured out she was up to something, and I intended to stop it. In other words, I was implying:

*I'll let you off this time, don't push your luck.*

That should have allowed me to focus on my work again. But just a few seconds later, my hopes were shattered. I felt it again at the back of my head.

She must have decided to keep going, after seeing through my simple plan. Even if I turn around quickly, I couldn't see exactly what she was doing before her left hand clenched shut. The speed was ultimately limited. So, It was difficult to confirm what was inside her left hand.

*But what in the world is she doing...?*

Suddenly, from the corner of my vision, I noticed Shiraishi's finger move, pointing to the floor.

I see...

*So that's what the strange feeling was about.*

Furthermore, Shiraishi positioned the tip of her left index finger against her desk and began tapping it— tap, tap. Each time her fingertip was about to make contact, the odd sensation happened.

In other words, I could time my move right before that sensation recurred.

Her fingertip rose, then fell again.



Catching that moment, I turned. Morishita, startled, had no time to hide.

I ignored her active right hand and grabbed her clenched left hand, forcing it open. Inside was something we definitely don't need in class — a simple eraser we hardly ever use anymore.

“What's this?”

“What do you mean ‘this’?”

“And what about those little eraser bits that fell on the floor?”

“I don't know.”

Playing dumb wouldn't work anymore. It seemed Morishita had been rubbing the eraser on her desk, gathering bits and throwing them into my hair.

“It would be better to confess now, Morishita-san.”

“Thanks for your help, Shiraishi. You clued me in on the timing so I could catch her in the act.”

“Tch, I see. You're more cunning than I gave you credit for, Asuka Shiraishi.”

“Sorry. I just couldn't watch poor Ayanokoji suffer any longer.”

“Morishita, isn't this kind of thing commonly called bullying?”

“Bullying? Now that's an absurd accusation. Let me ask you: if a little kitten flicks its claws at a lion, would you call that bullying? Picture it.”

“Umm... no, I wouldn’t.”

“Right? Bullying is when the strong pick on the weak. Ayanokoji Kiyotaka is someone aiming to be class leader, physically stronger as well, while I’m just a weak girl. From any angle, it’s obvious who’s strong and who’s weak. So if anything, call it a heroic act on par with Joan of Arc.”

“And how does the Maid of Orleans fit here?”

“Because she was a virtuous knight fighting evil?”

*I’m the evil, and Morishita’s the good guy?*

That makes zero sense in this context.

“How cute.”

Shiraishi murmured softly, watching our back-and-forth with a quiet smile.

If we’re talking about appearances alone, sure, Morishita is the sort of girl you could call cute. But describing her behavior as “cute” would probably only make sense to someone who isn’t the victim.

“I guess I’ve finally figured out why Sugio so readily gave up this seat. That’s the reason, huh.”

“Yeah. Apparently anyone seated in front of Morishita ends up treated like this.”

“As long as evil remains in this world, I have a mission to keep fighting.”

She made that statement, though it doesn't make sense at all— while Shiraishi kept smiling happily.



## Chapter 7: Ayanokoji's Defeat

Two weeks passed in a flash, and the day of our first special exam as third-year students arrived.

It was 7:40 am. Karuizawa had gone to bed early last night and didn't force herself to stay up. Therefore, she woke up feeling very clear-headed. After finishing her usual routine, she quietly left the dorm by herself.

*First, she had lived a life on campus alone.*

*Then, she had lived it with someone special.*

*Now, she was back to being alone again.*

Ever since breaking up with Ayanokoji, she hadn't smiled even once. She no longer had the energy to smile.

Her friends, led by Sato, had done everything they could to cheer her up and ease her pain—yet that kindness only made her hurt more. Her heart kept screaming in pain, day after day. Even so, she kept going to school without stopping, relying solely on her last shred of willpower.

On the way to school, Karuizawa couldn't help but stop in her tracks. Because on a bench ahead, she spotted Ayanokoji sitting and looking at his phone.

Ever since the breakup, Karuizawa—who wanted to remove all distracting thoughts, still harbored strong feelings for Ayanokoji. Every time she saw her ex-boyfriend, she felt a stabbing pain in her



chest. Naturally, her gaze followed him. If their eyes were to meet, that stabbing pain would come again. Ayanokoji showed no hint of regret about their breakup. And that, to Karuizawa's heart, was another merciless form of torture.

But even so, she had to keep moving forward. Realistically, all she had to do was hold her head high, say 'Good morning,' and walk past him. If she could just pretend to be strong, it shouldn't be that hard. She had rehearsed that scenario a thousand times in her mind, telling herself she could handle it. She mustered the courage to take a step— and then...

“Good morning, Karuizawa-san.”

“!?”

Karuizawa jumped at the unexpected voice behind her. She had been so focused on Ayanokoji that she failed to notice anyone approaching.

Turning around, she saw her face being stared at by a pair of sparkling big eyes. Lustrous long hair, moist and glossy cherry lips. Ichinose was the kind of beauty anyone would find captivating, even other girls.

“I-Ichinose-san. Morning...”

“You’re out earlier than usual today.”

“Huh? Oh... maybe...”

Ichinose’s comment made Karuizawa realize she had indeed left a bit sooner than normal. But the way Ichinose phrased it, as if she knew

her routine, felt a bit unnerving.

“You... know what time I usually leave?”

“Sure. You’re usually around 7:50, right?”

“...Yeah... I guess so...”

Karuizawa couldn’t help feeling a slight chill at how easily Ichinose answered. After all, She herself never paid much attention to the exact time she left.

“Lately, there have been days where Ayanokoji-kun sits on the bench like that, you know.”

“Oh... You seem to know a lot about him.”

“Well, I come out around this time too, so I see him pretty often. If you alter your routine, the sights you see change too.”

They paused their conversation as other students streamed by on the way to school. Most of them greeted Ichinose, and she smiled back at each one.

Having lots of friends isn’t everything in life, Karuizawa knew that. But the difference in their daily experiences was a lot. No matter where she looked— left, right, front, or back— there were only Ichinose's friends. Perhaps even among the students in Class A, where Karuizawa belonged, a higher proportion greeted Ichinose more warmly than they did Karuizawa. She could also imagine that Ichinose was likely expanding her interactions not just with second-years, but already with the first-years too.

“You’re as popular as ever, Ichinose-san.”

“Popular? Nah, they’re just my friends saying hi. Plenty of people say hi to you too, Karuizawa-san.”

Out of another person’s mouth, that might have sounded sarcastic, but from Ichinose it felt entirely genuine. It was simply the result of how she had built relationships up to now.

“Oh, right. The special exam is finally today.”

“... Yeah, it is.”

“So, how’s your studying going?”

“I guess I’m doing what I can. You don’t have anything to worry about, Ichinose-san. Must be nice.”

“I wouldn’t say that. I’m just trying not to let the pressure get to me, so I put on a brave face.”

Judging by how cheerful she looked, Karuizawa found it hard to believe she was stressed at all.

It felt like the conversation was wrapping up, and Ichinose started to move on. Right then, Karuizawa couldn’t stop herself from speaking.

“Can I... ask something?”

Her mind said to just let Ichinose go, but her words slipped out faster than she could stop them.

“Sure. Anything. Well, if it’s about who’s in the minority battle or who’s getting penalty points, that’s a secret, okay?”

“No, not that...”

“Then I guess there’s nothing I can’t answer.”

Ichinose offered Karuizawa a bright smile, waiting for her question.

“Ichinose-san, um... are you...going out with Aya— with Ayanokoji-kun?”

She managed to force out the words in fragments, and she reflexively looked away, afraid to hear the answer.

It was one possible reason for the breakup— that he wanted to be with Ichinose, leaving her behind. Over these last few weeks in their third year, Karuizawa had taken note of how close Ichinose and Ayanokoji seemed. It didn’t look purely platonic. And she wasn’t alone— some other students had gossiped about them, too.

“Me? No way. As if I’d ever be good enough to date Ayanokoji-kun.”

Ichinose said, using an odd phrasing that lowered herself and elevated him. But no matter how you looked at it, they seemed like a perfect match— if anyone was a “best couple” it’d be them.

Karuizawa didn’t think too deeply about that, but she still couldn’t easily accept Ichinose’s denial. She refocused her gaze on Ichinose.

“If you’re hiding it because you don’t want to hurt me—”

“There’s really nothing like that going on. We’re definitely not a couple.”

"But—"

How could that be possible? Even if they weren't dating, their relationship had undoubtedly changed.

So, even at the risk of sounding persistent, she had to force herself and press the issue. Because this was a question she didn't want to ask a second time, nor hear the answer a second time. Ichinose let out a soft sigh as she faced Karuizawa's determined gaze.

"But then again, just as you thought, Karuizawa-san, our relationship isn't exactly ordinary."

"That... what does that mean, I don't get it, but... you really are dating after all, right?"

"Really, we're not. Absolutely not."

"I—I see..."

As someone who is always kind, Ichinose gave a straight answer, and Karuizawa believed she wasn't lying. If they truly were dating, Ichinose would have admitted it openly.

But Karuizawa still couldn't bring herself to feel happy. Even if they weren't dating today, it could happen tomorrow. It might even happen later today.

For her, Ichinose hooking up with Ayanokoji was a nightmare scenario. At least for this moment, it wasn't a reality. She clung tightly to that.

Ichinose, meanwhile, sensed Karuizawa's slight relief—her quiet happiness at the news they weren't dating. And in the process,

Ichinose noticed the stirring of a new emotion inside herself, a small darkness.

When she had first confronted her own feelings last year, Karuizawa had been Ayanokoji's girlfriend. Remembering that fact had brought tears of frustration more than once.

"I get it, Karuizawa-san. Ayanokoji-kun is pretty amazing, right?"

"Huh...?"

"I just can't figure out why you'd ever break up with a guy like that. I don't get it."

Though she knew the truth—that Karuizawa was the one who got dumped—Ichinose asked anyway.

"Th— that's..."

She couldn't bring herself to admit out loud that Ayanokoji had dumped her. She didn't want to give Ichinose any hope.

"You... Ichinose-san knows, right? Ayanokoji-kun, he—"

Karuizawa wanted to warn her, saying that getting too close to him could be risky. But while she was hesitating, Ichinose spoke first.

"You're going to say he's not ordinary, right?"

She anticipated Karuizawa's next words and cut her off.

"...Yeah."

Indeed, that was what she meant to say. She felt shaken that Ichinose saw right through her, but she could only nod.

Karuizawa could tell this girl next to her knew quite a lot about Ayanokoji.

“Thanks for the heads-up or advice, but I’ll be fine.”

“...How can you be so sure?”

“I’m not entirely sure. But... Do you regret breaking up with him?”

“I— I don’t...no...”

“Is that so? It doesn’t look that way to me. Haven’t you thought that if circumstances had been different, you two could have stayed together?”

Regardless of who dumped whom, If a relationship fell apart, it was because something disrupted it. If that disruption had been removed, the future might have changed.

“This is just my guess, but did you two split up because you wanted something in return?”

Facing this statement, Karuizawa's suppressed emotions began to slowly boil over. By what right did Ichinose, an outsider, get to criticize her like this?

“What do you mean ‘In return’? I never—!”

“If you love someone, you want them to love you back. If you care, you want them to care in return— give and take. Not getting that can

hurt, make you sad or lonely. It's the same not just in romance, but with friends or family—”

“What are you even saying... Isn't that normal...?”

“Normally, yes. But I'm different.”

“That's impossible. Surely you— Ichinose-san— want a boyfriend, right?”

If you say “I like you,” you want to hear “I like you too.” That tiny exchange is the sweetness people long for.

“Who would that be— Ayanokoji-kun, maybe?”

“You—”

“By now, you must have realized I like Ayanokoji-kun.”

Ichinose said it outright, with no shame or hesitation. Then she took a small breath and continued before Karuizawa could speak.

“You see, for me... it's not so much about wanting someone to reciprocate my feelings. I just want to get along with the people around me, help them move forward— and I don't expect a reward for that. I see Ayanokoji-kun on that same continuum. I don't need him to like me back. It's enough that I like him.”

“...How can you stand that...?”

“I can. Like I said, it's not just romance— I want to be someone who helps the people around me. If someone's in trouble, I'll help them. That's all.”



No doubt those were Ichinose's true feelings.

Helping with no strings attached.

"...This is..."

Right now, for Karuizawa, that was brutal and suffocating. But looking into Ichinose's eyes, Kei understood something— something you'd only realize when you love the same person.

Kei had once been the first and only one at his side. So she had to ask.

"If..."

"Hm?"

"If I asked... if I asked you, Ichinose-san, for help... would you help me?"

In "*someone in trouble*" Karuizawa herself should be included— normally. It should have been like that.

Karuizawa should never have come to ask Ichinose, her rival in love, for help. Ichinose had originally thought so, but these words hit Ichinose like a blow to the head. After a brief moment of silence, Ichinose smiled faintly.

"Sorry. I take back what I said. I won't help you."

Kindness. Hypocrisy. And now something different.

Ichinose had arrived at a new way of thinking.

"I don't have the power to help everyone."

Sometimes, you have to choose.

Until now, if there were 100 people needing her, she wanted to help all 100. Even if she only had the power to help 50. It may even result in the 50 people who could have been saved not being saved. So, now she would focus on the present and do her utmost to help those she prioritized.

This was Ichinose's new value system: prioritization. And Karuizawa Kei just happened not to be among those she prioritized.

“Oh, by the way, I never told you the reason Ayanokoji-kun sits on that bench—”

Ichinose peeked up from below at Karuizawa's downcast eyes and smiled faintly.

“He’s waiting for me around this time.”

Karuizawa had no reply. She just lowered her gaze further.



“And one more thing, let me be perfectly clear— If something ‘secret and special’ ever happened between me and Ayanokoji-kun, even if we developed a deep relationship— that day, that time, was already after he broke up with you, Karuizawa-san. So, I haven't done anything to wrong you. So, there's no problem with us continuing to be friends, right?”

With that said, Ichinose walked on, calling out to Ayanokoji.

He heard her voice, put his phone away, and started walking beside her. He briefly noticed Kei standing there, but that was all. He didn't look back, nor did his expression change. Ichinose was looking at him and smiling happily.

Kei felt like her stomach was twisting into knots. So she left the road to school and hid in the woods nearby. No one saw her slip away.

## Part 1

Lunch break ended, and it was the final moments before the special exam for Class 3-B, led by Ryuen. The classroom was filled with a tense atmosphere.

Most students spent nearly all of the remaining time studying— both for themselves and to avoid angering Ryuen. Of course, this was to increase the points as well, Since each extra point on the exam could make a difference.

Even so, everyone shared one silent wish:

*Please don't let me be one of the five people chosen to participate in the minority battle.*

If you were chosen and lost, who knew what Ryuen would do to you.

At the very least, one would expect to learn beforehand if you were going to be picked. But Ryuen hadn't said a word. No one knew who would end up in the minority battle.

Until the exam started, everyone felt like a potential candidate.

Under such intense pressure, not a single person dared to let their guard down.

Katsuragi, who knew the class's academic levels best, felt that while two weeks wasn't a lot of time, the class was genuinely making progress. Of course, students like Kaneda, Katsuragi himself, and Shiina didn't feel anxious about this strict approach— they only

wanted to earn as many points as they could for the class, whether they were chosen for the minority battle or not. Even so, they still looked serious. They knew their opponents in Class C were far ahead academically.

“All right. I’ll announce the five students who will participate in the minority battle.”

Their homeroom teacher, Sakagami, was the only one who had heard Ryuen’s selections yesterday.

“In Round 1: Daichi Ishizaki. Round 2: Nanami Yabu. Round 3: Mio Ibuki. Round 4: Reo Kondo. Round 5: Minori Kinoshita. These five will represent our class in the minority battle.”

After hearing these names, the students couldn’t hide their shock. They looked around in disbelief. Because even without knowing who would be chosen, they never expected such an absurdly random combination. Each one of them was either at the low end academically or simply not motivated enough to study. Ibuki had once been doing okay at the start of second year, but then she steadily fell behind to Ishizaki’s level. Not only had Ryuen chosen people like that, he had also left out those who were obviously more qualified. Tokito pulled back his chair, furious at how his efforts over the past two weeks seemed all for nothing. He glared at Ryuen.

“What’s with this ridiculous list, Ryuen?! You’re throwing the minority battle away?!”



They hadn't expected to do well in the group portion. Their only hope was to miraculously achieve 4 wins in the Minority battle to turn things around. Everyone clung to that possibility, however small.

But Ryuen responded without hesitation.

“That’s right. I’m throwing it away. No matter how many plans you cook up, we couldn’t win this from the start. You got a problem with that?”

“A problem? Damn right I do! Sure, even if we try, we probably can’t win. And if you blow tons of private points to buy more penalty points, everyone would be pissed too. But still, giving up entirely before we even start is meaningless! Then why the hell did we study like crazy all this time?!”

“Why? Obviously for yourselves.”

“Don’t screw with me!”

Arguing with Ryuen was nothing new for Tokito. Sakagami simply removed his glasses and calmly wiped the lenses, pretending not to hear.

“Ha. Then let me ask you, do you seriously think we can win if we ‘try hard?’”

“Maybe so. Their side won’t all be geniuses. They’ll have to worry about penalty points too, so they might pick someone who can only manage around 60 points. Then if we send in Kaneda or Katsuragi, we could beat them. We do have a chance—”

“That wouldn’t even happen in a fantasy. Childish, delusional talk won’t help.”

“But still, throwing in the towel right away is even more pointless!”

“Pointless? Let’s see, Sakagami— did the enemy assign penalty points to any of the five I picked?”

“...No. None at all.”

Hearing that, Ryuen grinned broadly, being sure that his plan was correct.

“So what if they didn’t? Nobody would bother giving penalty points to Ishizaki and the others anyway.”

“It’s not pointless. None of our five got targeted. In other words, they had no clue what I was thinking.”

After meeting with Ayanokoji that day and having a meeting at the karaoke place, Ryuen had pulled Katsuragi aside at the very end. He told him he was scrapping the plan he’d just proposed.

In the old days, he would’ve jumped headfirst into battle, using every possible means to defeat Ayanokoji— only to lose when Ayanokoji inevitably came out on top.

But stepping back and observing carefully is sometimes vital. It was obvious from the start that this special exam was heavily against them. Ryuen couldn’t find any trick to beat Ayanokoji in this special exam. So charging in blindly wouldn’t result in anything. Depending on the



situation, it was better to calmly apply the brakes and take control. That was Ryuen's new conclusion.

In other words, Ayanokoji would never expect a tactic of “simply not fighting.”

He would be on guard, trying to guess which cunning plan Ryuen might use, and he might even invest large amounts of private points to pull it off. Ayanokoji would be working hard, but that effort was for nothing. In reality, all their predictions were off, and they guessed none of Ryuen's actual picks. The result was zero hits.

“So you struck them quietly behind the scenes, huh, Ryuen? They must be shocked.”

“Heh, guess that guy's not invincible after all.”

Tokito's anger flared again at Ryuen's smug attitude.

“They might be upset with your trick, but the fact remains they'll still win easily. You lined up a bunch of clueless losers— Class C must be loving you for it!”

“All except Ayanokoji, anyway.”

“Why the hell do you keep talking about him? Sure, His crazy transfer became a topic, but what use is this Ayanokoji anyway? You think he can replace Sakayanagi as a leader?”

Hearing that, Katsuragi added calmly:

“Ryuen's convinced he can. I share that opinion. But that's not something to debate right now. Ayanokoji is being tested to see if he

has the qualities and the authority to stand as a leader. Whether he sees through Ryuen's plans here will matter greatly down the road."

"So your goal was to make Ayanokoji misread the situation...? Is that it?"

"Exactly."

"Even if that helps in the future, you're taking this way too far. We're probably looking at seven straight losses here, losing even more class points."

"That won't happen."

Ryuen denied this with a smile. Tokito couldn't understand and clicked his tongue.

"Losing the group battle was a given. And with people like these in the minority battle, it's guaranteed we'll lose all five rounds... No matter how you look at it."

"No. I've already figured out Ayanokoji's plan. If I'm right, that fool will participate in the minority battle himself."

"Right. Their five picks were: Round 1: Kiyotaka Ayanokoji, Round 2: Ikkei Shimazaki, Round 3: Shinobu Fukuyama, Round 4: Kosei Sanada, Round 5: Yasumi Sawada. Then, as you planned, all 100 of the free penalty points went to Ayanokoji. Meaning no matter what score he gets, it's counted as zero. As long as Ishizaki doesn't literally score zero himself, they can't win Round 1."

"What... We put all 100 penalty points on Ayanokoji...?!"

“I told you, I know exactly how he thinks.”

Even someone as weak academically as Ishizaki can avoid a literal zero. He definitely won't hand in a blank page, so that guarantees a round win for Class B.

“You mean I can beat that Ayanokoji guy?! Really?! This is awesome!”

Sure, they'll likely end up with one win and six losses overall, but that single victory is gold.

“First hearing it might sound insane, but it's the best solution if you want to minimize risk. The opponent basically just stacked all their strongest scorers. We don't know how they distributed their own penalty points, but they've almost certainly split them up among the top students. We'd lose anyway.”

Clashes between students of similar levels might result in a win or two depending on the matchup and order. But their general success rate would remain low, especially with the group battles already set against them. Tokito saw the opponent's lineup, and although displeased, he could only back down dejectedly.

“Let them celebrate their precious victory. Ayanokoji's plans are all ruined. Knowing him, it wouldn't be impossible for him to boldly announce his entire plan before the exam, you know—he wants the leader role, after all.”

Such an ability was definitely what he needed if he wanted to lead Class C.

“This’ll make him look completely foolish.”

“And with that, Class C probably won’t be so quick to accept him as their leader.”

Even if he does become their leader someday, this at least slows him down.

Someday in the future, Ryuen wanted to confront and defeat him on a perfect stage. He believed that this exam result would show that he could still be flexible, stepping back rather than charging in if needed. Right now, everything was going exactly as Ryuen had planned.

## Part 2

Meanwhile, things were similar over in Horikita's Class 3-A.

Class 3-A was facing Class 3-D. Though Ichinose's class had the advantage due to the difference in number of students, Class 3-A still had a decent chance of winning the group battle. And Depending on how the penalty points were assigned in the minority battle, either side could take it.

It should have been a tense fight between equals— or at least that's how it was supposed to be.

But as the tense atmosphere weighed on them, the next announcement from homeroom teacher Chabashira only made it heavier.

“I'm afraid we have some unfortunate news. Of the five students you chose, three were assigned penalty points. In Round 2: Wang Mei-Yu, Round 3: Teruhiko Yukimura and Round 5: Rokusuke Koenji. Each got 25 points deducted from their final score. Meanwhile, we assigned points to two of their five minority battle participants— Round 2: Ryuji Kanzaki and Round 3: Hitomi Tsube. Those two received 10 penalty points each.”

“Three people got a 25-point penalty...? How can that be...?!”

It was now practically impossible to recover from that. A 25-point penalty would halve even an A-level student's advantage, dragging them down to around a tie with a D-level student.

“So they must have spent private points to buy all those penalty points?”

“I’m sorry, but we haven’t been told the exact amount they spent. All we know is that three of your participants were targeted.”

If they penalized ten people at 25 points each, that would be 250 total points. Subtract the free 100, and you would need 150 more, or 7.5 million private points. It was hard to imagine them spending that huge sum. The next thought was—

“Hey, Hirata. As much as I hate to bring this up, isn’t this basically a leak of our lineup?”

Sudo, trying to face reality, couldn’t help drawing that conclusion.

“...I can’t deny the possibility. But the only people I discussed it with were a few folks involved in selecting the five participants— plus the five themselves— and Horikita. That’s it.”

For the minority battle, Horikita had handed the decision-making to Hirata, since she felt too unsettled to remain calm and make a judgement. But Hirata was the kind who couldn’t finalize it alone, so he gathered multiple people to help him choose. Of course, the list was kept strictly secret— everyone was told not to share it.

“Then one of them must’ve leaked it.”

“No... but I just can't imagine something like that.”

“Look at our targeted participants. Normally, who would throw penalty points at Koenji? Even if he participated, the guy wouldn't do

it properly, the opponent must know—”

Halfway through speaking, Sudo realized another possibility.

"Could it be, Koenji, you did this? Did you spread the participant list beforehand?"

Koenji didn't show any reaction to the question but Hirata immediately denied it.

"That's not it. Koenji-kun was the only one I didn't even consult beforehand. I just told him he might be chosen as a participant."

If Koenji had been excluded from the list from the start during discussions, the opponent would only be delighted.

Hirata judged it important to carefully investigate everyone from Ike to Koenji and make selections. Ultimately, Hirata concluded that choosing Koenji could be an unexpected move against the opponent. Although Koenji didn't follow anyone's instructions, judging from past written tests, he was relatively serious about them. The Minority Battle was merely an extension of the overall battle, individuals didn't need to do much extra. Therefore, even if left alone, he could achieve a reasonably high score.

But regardless of what Koenji would actually do, him becoming a target for penalty points was truly unexpected.

"Then why? No matter how you think about it, this kind of thing—"

“From my perspective, I don't think information leaked. Also, if you notice who got penalized, it's not all five— the remaining two are

fine. If they'd gotten the list, wouldn't they have nailed every single person? There'd be no reason to leave out two."

Kushida pointed that out to Sudo, who did not want to fight while still harboring doubts.

"...Yeah, you've got a point..."

"So maybe Ichinose-san guessed right on those three by deduction? That's pretty amazing..."

Moreover, assigning 25 points was a bold move, and many students, led by a whispering Shinohara, reacted with shock at this nearly impossible tactic.

Except for one person.

"...I don't think that's what happened."

Almost to herself, Karuizawa suddenly spoke.

"What do you mean, Kei-chan?" Sato, seated a little way off, asked.

"I... don't think Ichinose-san is the one who saw through us..."

She took a breath.

Even now, she couldn't easily say the name and also she couldn't shake that morning scene— Ichinose and him, walking side by side, smiling so happily. But from that, she came to a conclusion.

"Could it be... Ayanokoji-kun?"

Their former classmate.



Hearing this name, Ike jumped up furiously and shouted.

“Huh? W-why would it be him? He’s in Class C now. That’s got nothing to do with us.”

“To Class C, we’re an enemy too, aren’t we?”

Karuizawa’s tone was blank, almost emotionless, as she looked at Ike. Something about her gaze made Ike flinch.

“Th-that's... well...”

For Hirata, who sensed many uncertainties, Karuizawa’s suggestion seemed to solve everything.

“It’s possible... He spent two years in our class, so he knows our situation. He can guess who we’d pick better than anyone else. He also knows Koenji-kun secretly does take these tests pretty seriously, so it’s not impossible that he foresaw this.”

“If that's the case, Ayanokoji's seriously the worst...!”

“We can't be certain yet. Whether it was an information leak or Ayanokoji-kun tipping them off, these are all speculations. We can only fight with the hand we've been dealt.”

A sense of despair spread before the exam even began. Still, they had to overcome it.

“Everyone... I’m sorry... I... couldn’t do anything...”

Horikita spoke with a voice full of regret, then sank further into misery. If only she’d done more, she thought, maybe the outcome

could have been different.

“We haven’t lost yet. No matter how bad it looks, as long as we fight, there are still chances.”

Hirata did his best to sound composed, knowing that morale was everything. Dropping it any further would only worsen their final scores.

Shortly after, Chabashira officially declared the start of the special exam.

## Part 3

The special exam that started in the afternoon was over, and now it was time for Class 3-D's homeroom. The results aren't announced the next day or some other day, they were to be announced on the same day. Many students in the class looked excited and eagerly awaited the results.

Ichinose carefully observed the entire class, making a comprehensive judgment based on everyone's expressions and other factors, feeling hopeful about the outcome. They weren't sure about the group battle, but the penalty points assigned in the minority battle had worked even better than expected.

Her initial prediction of a 50% win rate probably rose to around 70% now. Of course, she couldn't relax until the moment she saw the results. It was possible that Horikita's class, despite the 25-point disadvantage, could still score high consecutively, or achieve better-than-expected results in the whole class battle. So there was anticipation mixed with unease.

But the moment Hoshinomiya stepped into the classroom, all that tension vanished in a flash. Hoshinomiya's biggest strength, which might also be called her weakness, was obvious right now. Before announcing the results, her expression relaxed significantly, looking like she couldn't hold back her smile. Anyone could tell who won.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. The special exam results are here, and I'm about to announce them.”

“Woohoo! Great job!”

Shibata jumped up with fist raised and arms flexed in excitement.

“Hey, hey, I haven’t actually said anything yet~?”

“It’s super obvious! We did it, we did it!”

Seeing Shibata dancing around, Hoshinomiya couldn’t hide her own smile.

“Lately Shibata-kun’s really been all sunshine. Or maybe... he’s a bit too cheerful? It’s like his personality changed.”

Kobashi and Iizuka, seated up front, whispered to each other while watching Shibata.

“You know, he did just get rejected...right?... It’s not like he’s self-destructing, but maybe if he doesn’t act all cheerful, he won’t be able to hold it together.”

“Exactly~ And it’s not just Shibata-kun, but hey, guess that’s just how it is~”

“I didn't expect a public confession or anything, Honami-chan has changed too... No wait... Speaking of which, are she and Ayanokoji-kun already dating?”

“Not sure. But the two of them have been coming to school together a lot lately, so maybe they are?”

“Hmm... But still, I mean, yeah, Ayanokoji-kun is pretty handsome, but to win over that Honami-chan, there must be some story behind

it.”

Iizuka glanced at Ichinose and nodded in admiration.

“Shh! If you stare too obviously, people will notice. The guys are kinda sensitive about all this, better not stir anything up.”

“But, but I’m so curious~ Especially about Karuizawa-san’s situation... We definitely can’t ask, right?”

“No way, no way. That would be so insensitive.”

“All right, everyone, let’s take a look at the results together~”

Hoshinomiya cleared her throat, gently calling the chattering students to attention. Then she operated her tablet and put up the exam results.

## Special Exam Results

### A Class vs D Class

#### Overall Battle:

**A Class:** 2633 points

**D Class:** 2712 points

#### Minority Battle:

**Round 1:** A Class: Sudo Ken (66 points) vs D Class: Himeno Yuki (69 points)

**Round 2:** A Class: Wang Mei-Yu (82 points, Penalty -25) vs D Class: Kanzaki Ryuji (75 points, Penalty -10)

**Round 3:** A Class: Yukimura Teruhiko (84 points, Penalty -25) vs D Class: Tsube Hitomi (77 points, Penalty -10)

**Round 4:** A Class: Mori Nene (69 points) vs D Class: Kobashi Yume (68 points)

**Round 5:** A Class: Koenji Rokusuke (72 points, Penalty -25) vs D Class: Beppu Ryota (71 points)

## B Class vs C Class

### Overall Battle:

**B Class:** 2327 points

**C Class:** 2880 points

### Minority Battle:

**Round 1:** B Class: Ishizaki Daichi (40 points) vs C Class: Ayanokoji Kiyotaka (100 points, Penalty -100)

**Round 2:** B Class: Yabu Nanami (47 points) vs C Class: Shimazaki Ikkei (81 points)

**Round 3:** B Class: Ibuki Mio (43 points) vs C Class: Fukuyama Shinobu (79 points)

**Round 4:** B Class: Kondo Reo (47 points) vs C Class: Sanada Kosei (83 points)

**Round 5:** B Class: Kinoshita Minori (50 points) vs C Class: Sawada Yasumi (80 points)

Both Horikita and Ichinose, the leaders of their respective classes, chose not to participate in the minority battle for fear of receiving penalty points. Class A's strategy was to mix top scorers with mid-level scorers, putting Sudo and Koenji in as a surprise. On the other hand, Class D chose mostly mid-to-upper students.

Although judging solely from the results, the upper-ranked class ultimately lost, Class D's victory was by no means overwhelming. Few probably felt it was an easy win.

"It was scary, but I'm really glad we bought those penalty points." Amikura said happily, and Ichinose nodded.

Besides the three who actually participated in the minority battle, Ichinose also targeted Hirata Yosuke and Kushida Kikyo with 25 penalty points each. Altogether, she used 1.25 million private points to buy more. Though it wasn't a small sum, dividing it among forty classmates meant each person only contributed 31,250 points, so the burden wasn't huge. If they won, each month's extra class points would translate to 10,000 private points for every student, so they'd recoup it in four months, plus some profit.

"Congratulations! You managed a brilliant victory against Class A—one you absolutely had to win!"

Even though many already expected this outcome, the class still erupted into cheers once it became official.

“Well done, Honami-chan! We won, we won!”

The girls around her also burst into joy following Hoshinomiya's words.

“Phew. Looks like I can finally relax a bit.”

Ichinose high-fived Shiranami next to her, who was overjoyed.

Seeing everyone's happy faces, their homeroom teacher Hoshinomiya nodded happily.

“Yes, yes. As your teacher, I'm extremely satisfied with this result. Of course, there's still a gap between us and the top, so please don't slack off— keep up the hard work, all right?”

“By the way... Ayanokoji-kun lost his match, but he scored a perfect 100 on the test? Are you kidding me?!”

“There were a bunch of super-tough questions, right? Some I couldn't even understand at all...”

The class buzzed with surprise, while Kobashi and Iizuka exchanged glances.

*So that's how it is!?*

The thought popped into their minds

“A cool handsome guy who's been hiding his abilities until now... Ah, so that's it, Kobashi-san...”



“That’s it, Iizuka-san... So Honami-chan knew about that and that’s why...”

They gripped each other’s hands, eyes shining, nodding away in shared speculation.

Ichinose remained unaware of their chatter, taking out her phone to text Ayanokoji:

Getting a perfect score is amazing. Although it's a shame you got targeted with penalty points, but your class still won, which is awesome. Thanks to you, our class managed to win too. Just as expected — Koenji-kun participated and Horikita-san didn't. Thank you so much!

Right after she sent it, her phone showed it had been read. She got a reply:

It’s because you, Ichinose, had the courage to trust me and go with my suggestion. That’s why you won.

Reading such a humble answer, Ichinose couldn’t stop smiling.

They were technically still in class, so she didn’t continue the exchange and closed her phone right away.

## Part 4

After Mashima-sensei finished delivering the special exam results, he left the classroom. Normally, people would already be packing up and heading out, but today, no one moved.

The first to leave his seat was Shimazaki. No— more precisely, everyone was waiting to see what Shimazaki would do. Shimazaki stood up in silence and headed straight towards me.

All the other students kept a close watch on our interaction. His expression was extremely stern.

“Ayanokoji, you know what I’m about to say, right?”

He pointed at the special exam results still displayed on-screen.

“Not a single one of your penalty-point picks was correct. Quite a spectacular debut.”

“Calm down, Shimazaki. Our class won the exam, and that’s what matters in the end.”

Hashimoto hurried over to stand between Shimazaki and me, trying to defuse the situation, but Shimazaki ignored him.

“I told you before the exam, didn’t I? It’s not about whether the class wins or loses.”

“It was about the accuracy of using penalty points, correct?”

“I was expecting you’d at least guess two right, maybe even three.”

“Winners get all, losers get nothing. Let's just drop it this time, okay? Huh?”

Hashimoto, who'd been on edge since seeing the results, tried desperately to smooth things over.

“We're not just letting it slide. I want this settled right here and now.”

“Then at least we should talk privately, just the three of us. No need for everyone to hear your complaints, right?”

Just as Shimazaki clenched his fist, ready to refuse the idea, the door to the classroom suddenly slammed open. Everyone turned toward the source of the commotion.

“Yo, hope we're not interrupting.”

Ryuen walked in without so much as a knock, bringing Ishizaki, Ibuki, and Albert along. A somewhat familiar lineup.

“Hey, what's the big idea barging in like this?”

Faced with a crew of intimidating faces, Shimizu—who was seated in the front near the door—stood up nervously to confront them. But Albert's massive form blocked his way before he could even get close to Ryuen.

That silent pressure forced Shimizu to sit back down.

Meanwhile, at the same time, Sawada, a girl who'd been listening in on me and Shimazaki, found herself directly in Ryuen's path. She missed her chance to step aside, froze up, and Ryuen simply shoved her out of the way by the shoulder.

“Kya!”

Sawada let out a small scream, luckily, she caught herself with her hands, otherwise, she might have fallen along with the desk. Though she didn't actually fall, Ryuen's ruthless gesture instantly froze the atmosphere in Class C.

It looked like a brawl was about to start in broad daylight in the classroom.

“There's so much going on today. What a mess.”

Hashimoto muttered, torn between dealing with Shimazaki, who was coming at me with a raised fist, and the newly arrived threat of Ryuen. He sighed, clearly wishing he could split himself in two.

Judging by his glance, he was also silently pleading for Kito's help. But even though Sawada had nearly fallen right next to Kito's seat, Kito just remained where he was, quietly observing.

“Why are there so few allies...”

Having no choice but to step up himself, Hashimoto steeled himself for a lone battle, standing between me, Shimazaki, and Ryuen.

“I came specifically to hear an interview with today's winner, so get out of my way.”

Ryuen curved his lips in a slight smirk, ignoring Hashimoto and closing in.

“Shoot him on the spot, I'll take full responsibility.”

A voice muttered that from a seat behind me. But she definitely had no intention of taking any responsibility, so I ignored it.

“Couldn’t you come back another time, Ryuen? We’re a bit tied up right now.”

“Oh? And?”

“What do you mean ‘And’? I know it’s not like you to just drop it... Ugh, this is so annoying.”

Ryuen reached Hashimoto and grabbed his shoulder, much like he had with Sawada. For an instant, Hashimoto seemed to consider fighting back but decided not to make the first move, letting Ryuen shove him forward.

“So? Is it official now? You leading Class C, Ayanokoji?”

“To use Shimazaki’s words, we’re not really judging this exam by wins or losses but by whether we guessed penalty targets accurately. Unfortunately, I guessed wrong on every single one.”

The screen behind us still showed that I had scored zero hits on the five opponents I’d picked.

“Not great, huh. No wonder the mood here’s so sour, even though you won. Don’t tell me you’re going to make excuses like you didn’t expect me to pick a bunch of idiots?”

“Who’re you calling an idiot?!”

“Hmm? Well, obviously me and Ibuki, right?”

Ishizaki asked, pointing to himself and Ibuki, completely unbothered.

“I know that! Don’t say it to our faces!”

“But you said you know. Besides, it wasn't to your face, it was behind your back.”

“That’s not the point!”

Ibuki responded by kicking Ishizaki in the butt. Ryuen ignored that noisy scuffle behind him and continued.

“Looks like you failed to earn the leadership position after all. What a pity.”

Hashimoto, who had been pushed aside, inserted himself between us again.

“You don’t get to decide that. Regardless of how we got here, we *did* win this special exam. Shimazaki and the others are just discussing the class’s next steps. Right?”

Hashimoto pleaded with his eyes for Shimazaki to at least go along with him here. But... Shimazaki didn't nod.

“I already said: our victory here was expected. Our class is best at academic-based exams. That alone can’t prove Ayanokoji’s worth. I told you: what mattered was how accurately he placed penalty points and how well he avoided being targeted. Looking at the results, both were done very poorly.”

In fact, in the overall battle, this class came out on top despite having fewer members.

“Look, Shimazaki, I—”

Ryuen cut Hashimoto off mid-sentence.

“Hah-hah-hah. So that’s it, huh? Looks like you’re quite busy here. Guess you’ll have to postpone the celebration for Ayanokoji’s big promotion.”

He took in the state of the room and gave a satisfied grin, then turned to leave.

Hashimoto clicked his tongue in annoyance— but if Ryuen left on his own, it actually saved them from more trouble.

Ordinarily, no one would bother calling out to an enemy retreating in smug satisfaction. Except for one person, me.

“Ryuen, your senses seem way too dull.”

“Senses? The hell?”

Ryuen stopped and turned back, not grasping my meaning.

“If you don’t get it, then let’s ask Shimazaki to finish what he was trying to say.”

Ryuen’s grin disappeared as he looked at Shimazaki.

“Hey, Ayanokoji, we really don’t need to do this now, not with him here...”

He clearly thought no good would come with pressing the issue. I ignored him.

Though Shimazaki looked intimidated by Ryuen, he took a deep breath, raised his head, and began.

“Ayanokoji, I’ll be blunt. I didn’t come to complain or pick a fight. Sure, I do have a lot I’m annoyed about... but I wanted to tell you that I’m willing to accept you leading this class. That’s it.”

Shimazaki wasn’t rejecting me. He was acknowledging me. No doubt both Ryuen and Hashimoto had no idea how he’d arrived at that conclusion.

“Hold on. That’s just weird. He didn’t guess a single one of my picks correctly, and he took part himself, only for me to guess right and force him to zero. That cost them the chance at a perfect score.”

Not only had I missed all of Ryuen’s minority participants, but I’d been singled out too. Hence Hashimoto’s frantic attempts to appease Shimazaki.

“You’re right. If Ayanokoji hadn’t participated, we probably could’ve swept all seven rounds. But... after seeing how everything ended up...”

With a faint smile, Shimazaki looked over at the screen. Ryuen followed his gaze, but didn’t see anything unusual.

Class C had won the overall exam 6-1, courtesy of Ryuen basically surrendering. They’d hidden their participants so thoroughly that we never guessed them, plus they predicted I would join the minority battle, giving me all 100 penalty points to prevent a perfect overall



victory. Exactly what he'd planned. But in reality, the point to focus on was completely different.

“What are you getting at?”

Instead of waiting for Shimazaki, I took the lead in explaining:

“In the minority battle, sure, identifying who the enemy will send is crucial. That's perfectly logical for Shimazaki and the others to focus on. But if the other side has no intention of seriously competing, there's nothing to ‘see through,’ is there? Even if we'd guessed Ibuki or Ishizaki were chosen, it wouldn't matter.”

“Huh? Under normal circumstances, yes. But this time, that was the main focus, wasn't it? If you couldn't figure out who I'd picked, that proves your class doesn't need you as a leader, since they won without it.”

“What actually matters isn't that trivial detail, but your true intention. The question is whether you would fight seriously, how you would fight, and how best to respond.”

Ryuen never wastes any chance to fight me, but going head-to-head with academics basically gives him zero chance of winning. That left him two choices: pour in huge sums of private points or throw the match. This time, the key was exactly which path he would choose. So I predicted he would forfeit the exam in his weaker area while still aiming to hurt me.

He was effectively postponing it. The real battle wasn't in April of our first semester as third years, but further down the line. Ryuen wanted

to push back my rise to class leader as much as possible. The final showdown would come later, so he delayed the conclusion.

But that's basically a fearful, passive strategy.

"Shimazaki, how do you feel about me now, based on the exam results?"

"To be honest, you're even more impressive than I imagined. I see why Hashimoto approached you. That's what I want to say."

"Huh?"

Seeing Shimazaki praise me highly even though I guessed everything wrong, Ryuen couldn't help but frown tightly.

"Think about it, Ryuen. Plenty of classmates with academic ability on par with Ayanokoji, even those who tried their hardest, scored only in the 80s. I'm one of them. But Ayanokoji got a full 100 on that test. With so many bafflingly tough questions, you can't deny it."

Shimazaki, proud of his academic strength, could recognize how incredible that was.

"So what? Being good at written tests means nothing."

"It means everything. In the end, we wanted to see if he had the power to save our class from collapse after Sakayanagi's withdrawal. Seeing his exam explanation just now, I realize he wasn't sidetracked by my demands like 'Guess two or three participants correctly'— he just made the best choice for the class."

Hearing that, Ryuen finally understood what was meant by his ‘dull senses.’

“It’s not just that he scored 100 points. Knowing someone like you would be dead-set against him demonstrates how serious he is. Blowing all 100 penalty points on a single person is crazy. Usually, 20 or 30 points is plenty safe.”

Ryuen, accurately guessing that I’d participate to prove my worth, tried to limit his risk by not overspending. But even though losing as a class was a cost, as long as I lost individually in the minority battle, that hindered me. He was adamant about denying me a complete victory, using my personal defeat to stop me from claiming leadership. That mind-set made him use all 100 points on me. And in turn, that showed everyone how wary he was of me— an unexpected level of caution. He guessed right. Precisely because it was correct, being seen through makes it meaningless.

I accepted the possibility of losing by joining the minority battle precisely so the class could see that massive 100-point penalty.

"Your past experiences make you know me well, but the students in Class C basically know nothing. They don't even know how high I can score on exams, or how wary Ryuen would be of me. This time, I chose the 5 students with the highest academic ability in Class C, without any tricks. And I already predicted you would deliberately choose unconventional picks, and knew you would definitely use penalty points on me. So I just needed to add one layer of insurance, just in case. All I had to do was keep an eye on high-ability students

like Katsuragi, Hiyori, and Kaneda. That was Class C's highest probability winning strategy; there was no need to play psychological games with you."

If I had successfully guessed some of the students this time, would everyone have genuinely recognized me?

*'He just happened to guess right'*

*'He just got lucky'*

Some people would definitely think that way.

That's only natural. Facing a strategy like rolling dice, guessing correctly from the start is impossible.

There was no need to take risks betting on such small odds.

The indisputable result spread from Shimazaki to everyone.

"Ryuen, no, everyone only saw the win/loss of the special exam. That's understandable, but I focused on a different outcome. That is, letting everyone recognize that *Ayanokoji Kiyotaka* is not an ordinary student. That he's capable of achieving outstanding results, enough to be thoroughly targeted by a class leader like Ryuen. It didn't need to be seen by everyone, just being clearly visible to some of them was enough. Although the screen only shows 1 loss in the individual match, no one would think I lost due to lack of ability, because this loss was clearly too abnormal."

"Haha, you're right. You certainly proved your extraordinary ability to everyone."

Hashimoto, watching this special exam discussion up close, gave a faint smile.

If I hadn't participated in the Minority battle, those around wouldn't know how many penalty points the opponent used on me, so participating had meaning.

Ryuen would walk in confidently afterward, revealing his final move.

That was all part of my script from the start. Ryuen followed it from beginning to end.

“Well, Ryuen? Is this development what you expected?”

The remaining Class C students directed harsh glares at Ryuen. He tried to tear down my position, but ended up boosting it.

“Tch... I see how it is. Fine.”

Ryuen muttered, turning around and leaving Class C.

After Albert closed the door, cheers erupted throughout the class. Seeing a common enemy forced to retreat in defeat filled everyone with delight.

“So this was the outcome you had planned all along. Exactly when did you start setting it up?”

“From the beginning. Gathering intel isn't enough— you have to use it. Remember how you and Morishita discussed the special exam at the cafe, and we spotted some first-year students apparently eavesdropping for Ryuen?”

“Yeah, I was impressed you realized so soon they were spies.”

“You and Morishita truly believed that if I failed to guess two or three participants, I wouldn’t be acknowledged. That conversation was probably recorded by those first-years and given to Ryuen. Plus, Ryuen probably spied on Shimazaki’s group as well.”

Ryuen would never pass up that crucial data.

“So you turned that to your advantage. But—”

“You recall I mentioned memorizing all the new first-year names and faces, yet Morishita doubted we had proof those two were actually working for Ryuen, right?”

“Yeah. She said there wasn’t enough evidence.”

“Well, there was more going on. From the start of school until today’s results were posted, I asked one student to mix with the first-years.”

“Mix? Who?”

“Ryuen’s paying extra attention to you, Hashimoto, because you’re active in class intel gathering. He’d quickly catch you. But we do have someone who, in another class, can connect with her underclassmen smoothly, earn their trust fast, and naturally gather information.”

“You mean... Ichinose Honami?”

“That’s right. She discovered that those first-years had joined forces with Ryuen’s class for money. They apparently didn’t bother hiding it among themselves. However, this wasn’t information easily obtained.”

“So once you knew that, you were sure they were spies.”

Piece by piece, everything came together.

“Having alliances has its perks. This time, Ichinose managed to defeat Class A by trusting my advice without suspicion, which boosted her odds. Teaming up let us exchange and utilize information. The result: we each beat a higher-ranked class and closed the gap by 100 points.”

As Hashimoto and another friend stood there, impressed, Shimazaki stepped forward and extended his hand.

“Ayanokoji... Welcome to Class C.”

“Yeah. I look forward to working together.”

After I shook Shimazaki's hand, other classmates came up one by one, asking to do the same.

## Part 5

“O-oh, Ryuen-san—gah!” Right after leaving the classroom, Ishizaki tried to call out to Ryuen, but Ibuki quickly clamped a hand over his mouth, forcing both of them to stop in their tracks.

Ryuen, walking ahead on his own, didn't notice that Ishizaki and Ibuki had stopped. He just kept going.

Ryuen— and in fact the entire class— had known from the start this would be a harsh exam.

Fighting head-on in academics, their weak point, offered no chance of victory.

That was why Ryuen had aimed for an advantage beyond the win-loss outcome: humiliating Ayanokoji to postpone his rise as their new leader. But things turned out the opposite of what he wanted. Ayanokoji saw right through him.

It was entirely futile, just him working himself up over nothing.

He assumed Ayanokoji would come up with some clever trick in the exam, but once the results were in, it turned out nothing special had been done at all. By doing basically nothing, Ayanokoji still demonstrated his extraordinary nature to both his own class and the entire grade level: a perfect test score that no one else could manage, plus the proof of having a full 100 penalty points placed on him, revealing just how cautious Ryuen was. He even anticipated that Ryuen would come over to his classroom.



No— was that in itself a special move?

“What a... piece of crap.”

The end result was that his own thought process and actions had been fully exposed. Even the flexible tactics he prided himself on had played right into the enemy's hands.

Ryuen swung his arm up and slammed his fist against the wall.



It was an instinctive response from his body. If he didn't feel pain, if he didn't punish himself, he couldn't contain his emotions.

Even though the gap in class points had narrowed, they were still in the lead.

Next time, as long as it wasn't a special exam focused on academic ability, he would have a chance to win—

*But... was that really true?*

He'd always believed if you lost once, you just had to win the next time.

If you lost again, you just had to win the time after that.

His life motto had always been to secure the final victory.

Now it wavered again.

“Tch...”

*Conceit, blind confidence, arrogance.*

He thought he'd already cast all that aside long ago. Yet here he was, digging himself deeper, once more tasting defeat.

*“Can I really not win on my own...?”*

He recalled the words Sakayanagi had spoken just a few weeks prior, before leaving the school.

Unconsciously, Ryuen found himself already one step into an endless, dark path.

## Chapter 8: Enemies and Allies

Class A's loss— who should shoulder the blame? The conclusion was obvious from the start.

As the leader of the class, I was shaken by Ayanokoji-kun's transfer. The responsibility lies with me, who still can't pull myself together enough to devise even a single tactic. If I could have come up with one or two effective strategies, maybe we could have turned the situation around. Or perhaps the result was just unfortunate, no in reality, it was a crushing defeat.

After class, in the now— empty Class A classroom, I stayed behind alone, unable to reach an answer.

No one blamed me on the spot for our defeat. On the contrary, everyone comforted me, encouraging me to do better next time. But I barely heard the comforting words from Sudo-kun and the others.

I can't clearly remember what they said, nor can I retrieve it from my memory. When I came back to my senses, I realized I had just been sitting blankly in my seat until I was the only one left in the classroom. The classroom which was now bathed in twilight.

When I looked out the window, I realized the sun was about to set.

“I should go back...”

My mind was still blank as I got up to leave. Only when my hand touched the doorknob did I realize I had forgotten my bag, so I went

back to my seat.

As I made my way back through the deserted corridor toward the stairs, my mind drifted aimlessly.

*What am I supposed to do here?*

*What is my purpose here?*

I felt a strong sense of loneliness.

*I have become hopelessly weak...*

*I'll pull myself together tomorrow, right?*

*The day after tomorrow, I'll be able to move forward, right?*

*I don't know.*

*I don't know anything.*

*I just keep making the same mistakes.*

*...Just go back.*

*I just want to go back to the dorm and lie down in bed right now—*

As I stepped outside after putting on my shoes, my train of thought suddenly broke off. My vision shook violently.





A completely unexpected impact.

An intense pain shot through my back, and my body lurched forward uncontrollably. Although I instinctively put out my hands, I couldn't keep a decent posture and fell onto the ground. To make it worse, the ground was far from soft—it was a gravelly area.

Then a cloud of dust erupted into the air as my bag landed with a thud.

“Ow...!”

I immediately felt a sharp stinging pain in the hands and knees that I used to break my fall.

“What... what just happened!?”

A moment later, I finally realized I had been kicked.

*I need to identify the attacker.*

Even the thought of identifying the attacker came to me far too late.

“You're so lifeless, Horikita. You couldn't even dodge that single kick.”

A voice without even 1% guilt for kicking someone. Standing there with arms folded, looking down at me and smirking, was Ibuki-san.

“What... are you doing...? Are you out of your mind?”

Does she not realize how dangerous it is to launch a full-force kick at someone who's off guard?

Before my anger and warning could reach her, her scornful gaze fell on me.

“Seeing you so depressed pisses me off. Just looking at you irritates me too, and it’s starting to rub off on me.”

“That’s... your problem. If you don’t like looking at me, then don’t.”

I’ve had a rough time lately, we just suffered a major defeat and now I’m getting kicked out of nowhere by this uncivilized person?

*What terrible luck.*

Looking at the small bloodstain seeping from my palm, I sighed.

“Look, there you go again. Polluting my eyes with that weak look. You should be grateful I only gave you a single kick.”

“This makes... no sense.”

I really don’t feel like dealing with Ibuki-san right now. I got up while trying to brush off the dust. Luckily, my knees didn’t seem scraped.

“Tch. You can’t even muster a counterattack? Well, you wouldn’t stand a chance anyway. I will wipe you in seconds.”

“There’s... no way I’d do that, right...? And I... still—”

Even now, my head is filled with thoughts of Ayanokoji-kun.

“Ugh, you’re thinking about Ayanokoji again, aren’t you?”

“...So what? That has nothing to do with you.”



“Everyone’s the same: Ayanokoji this, Ayanokoji that. You should be celebrating that that walking plague finally vanished from the class, right?”

“I always thought you just weren’t very bright... no, make that not bright at all. But you’re an even bigger fool than I imagined. He’s gone, how could I possibly be happy about that?”

“If it were me, I’d be jumping for joy. Just thinking about his face makes my blood boil... Argh, I’m getting angry just remembering it. I really wanted to pay him back for what he did, but that damn Ryuen screwed it up and ended up looking like a clown.”

Ibuki-san kicked at the dirt on the ground.

*Is she actually frustrated?*

“What are you even talking about...?”

Muttering that under my breath, I recalled the results of today’s exam. I guess she was referring to how Ayanokoji-kun beat Ryuen-kun’s class. It must have been a remarkable victory, leaving a deep impression on the other side. Even that exam outcome felt distant to me until a moment ago, like it had nothing to do with me at all.

“You’re so annoying. If you’re just going to be pathetic like this, this is goodbye for us. Don’t ever come crying to me again. Actually, I don’t even want you in my field of vision.”

“I don’t remember burdening you with my problems. Frankly, we barely had any relationship to cut off in the first place.”

In fact, I invested my own money and a lot of time to help Ibuki-san when she was short on funds.

There's no part of that for her to complain about— if anything, she should be grateful.

“Fine. Bye.”

Having delivered her kick and saying what she wanted, Ibuki-san seemed satisfied and left.

I crouched where I was. The lingering pain in my back made me close my eyes.

“Why do things like this keep happening...?”

Ever since we entered our third year, The only joy I felt was that moment when I saw “Class A” on the sign plate.

*It hurts so much.*

*Is there anyone...*

*Save me...Ayanokoji-kun—*

“...Are you all right?”

Someone spoke to me as I was sitting there with my head low.

“You got kicked pretty hard. Are you hurt? Maybe we should call a teacher?”

She must have seen everything that just happened. Karuizawa-san gave me a worried look.

She was still in her uniform, so it seems she hadn't gone home yet.

"I'm fine... The pain's finally easing up. Seriously, Ibuki has no sense at all..."

I was about to take Karuizawa-san's outstretched hand when I suddenly noticed my hand was stained with blood and dirt.

Just as I tried to pull my hand back, she caught it gently and helped me to my feet.

Then without hesitation she used her handkerchief to brush off the dust on my uniform.

I barely had the energy to refuse, so I simply let her clean it.

"Sorry, and thanks. That must have been weird to watch... Did you overhear the conversation?"

"No... I just happened to be sitting on that bench over there and saw you and Ibuki-san."

Karuizawa-san pointed to a bench on the path back to the dorms.

I should have noticed. But until just now, Karuizawa-san hadn't entered my field of vision at all. So not noticing Ibuki-san also makes sense, I suppose.

She picked up my bag and suggested I sit down on the bench for a bit. I tried to act tough, but my back really did hurt, so I ended up taking her offer.

"Sorry, I got your handkerchief dirty, didn't I?"

“It's fine. That's what they're for.”

“I'm... really a mess right now...”

I sighed and closed my eyes.

*How pathetic must I have looked in front of her?*

“I'm sorry about today's exam, too. It's my fault we couldn't get the win. I really messed up.”

“I don't think it's all on you. If we had all tried a bit harder, we still had a chance in that group battle.”

“...Even so, it's still my fault.”

*I really need to pull myself together...*

*Even Karuizawa-san is worried about me.*

“You know, I'm sort of surprised.”

Karuizawa-san said this while sitting next to me.

“...Surprised?”

“In my mind, you're the kind of person who's more capable, more tough.”

“That's not true at all. I...”

I was about to deny it, but couldn't speak.

Because denying it would be lying.

“...No, you’re right. I did think I was strong. But that was a mistake. The one who was strong wasn’t me...”

I clenched the hand resting on my knee— pain slowly spread from my wounded palm.

“I was only able to charge ahead because Ayanokoji-kun was in our class.”

He was supporting me all along, but I thought it was my own strength.

“I’m weak. If you want to laugh, go ahead.”

I deserve that far more than any kind of sympathy.

“I would never laugh at you, Horikita-san. If we're talking about weakness, I'm the same.”

Yet she didn’t criticize me at all.

“That’s not true. You’ve had your own way of doing things ever since we enrolled here.”

She wasted no time blending in with the girls in class and quickly made friends. Some might call it superficial, but there’s no doubt she’s at the center of her circle. For me, even if I wanted to imitate it, I couldn't.

From her standpoint, maybe Ayanokoji-kun’s transfer was a relief...

If you’ve broken up with someone, maybe it’s simpler if they vanish from your everyday life.

But from that day on, Karuizawa-san hasn’t really smiled.

Perhaps she's just anxious about the future of our class?

“By the way... what is Ayanokoji-kun to you?”

I knew I shouldn't pry, but the question slipped out anyway.

“What is he to me... That's hard to sum up in a few words...”

Looking upward at the evening sky, she seemed lost in memory.

“To me, Ayanokoji-kun is irreplaceable. He's the most important person to me... someone I love deeply...”

From her tone and words, it doesn't look like she was the one who dumped him.

“...So he's the one who ended it?”

“I can't say. By not saying... it preserves the meaning of my own existence.”

“You...”

*How shallow and foolish I've been...*

*My suffering doesn't even begin to compare to hers.*

*I only realized this now, when it's already too late.*

“Horikita-san, One hardship after another and now this major setback — it makes things hard for you, right?”

“...It really does...”

Her gentle presence slowly lifted something that had weighed on my heart for a long time.

The darkness in front of my eyes was gradually cleared.

“Ow... That kick was so harsh. Talk about having no restraint.”

Once my mind calmed down, I felt the pain in my palm again.

“Maybe. But... that might be Ibuki-san’s way of worrying about you.”

“Her? That can’t be.”

“I know because I sat on this bench for a long time today. Ibuki-san kept wandering around here without going home, it felt like she was waiting for someone.”

“She must have been waiting for someone else.”

If even Ibuki-san is concerned about me, then I’ve really hit rock bottom.

Then again, no matter what she was thinking, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m in terrible shape.

“You know, Horikita-san, can I ask something that might be a bit out of line?”

“Out of line? Go ahead.”

“Have you... fallen for Ayanokoji-kun too?”

“Eh—?”

Karuizawa-san’s gaze was serious. She was genuinely asking.

“Wh-what nonsense are you talking about?”

*Me, liking him? That’s impossible...*

I thought so, yet I couldn’t stop images of what happened during spring break from surfacing in my mind.

My heart was pounding then. I remember the shy sense of excitement, the happiness I’d never experienced before.

“No way... I’ve never—”

That was the limit of what I could blurt out.

“I’ve never liked anyone outside of my family before...”

“The fact you couldn’t deny it right away says something, doesn’t it? Normally, you would respond instantly: he and I are just in a cooperative partnership, or something. That’s your usual style, right? ...Though I’m not sure that’s exactly how you’d phrase it.”

Karuizawa-san showed no sign of anger. In fact, she even smiled a little.

Even though my frustration and sadness couldn’t compare to hers at all.

“You... You’re a much nicer person than I thought.”

“Wow, you’re only realizing that now?”

“Yeah, I had you pinned as a much more unpleasant, sarcastic person.”

“That’s rude~ Well, maybe not.”



Karuizawa-san continued after mocking herself:

“Honestly, I think I used to be a pretty awful person. Arrogant, willful, borrowing money without paying it back as if it was my right. I used to do whatever I wanted. At least, that’s how I was when I first enrolled.”

“...Sorry. I didn’t mean to criticize—”

“It’s fine. You’re not wrong. I hated that version of me, too. Now that I’ve changed, I can talk about it openly.”

“...So what made you change?”

“Kiyotaka—oh, I mean, Ayanokoji-kun... He’s the one who pulled me out of the darkness.”

“Darkness...?”

A trace of vulnerability showed in her eyes.

“It’s a secret I haven’t even told Maya-chan. Let me tell you, Horikita-san.”

She gently took my hand in hers.

Her small, cool hand somehow gave me a mysterious sense of reassurance. Although my hand was injured, this moment made me forget the pain.

*What followed was the story of the life lived by the girl named Karuizawa Kei.*

*An unimaginably painful past.*

She entered this school hoping to leave behind the bullying she suffered in middle school, even if it meant acting like a terrible person and faking a relationship with Hirata.

After that— some students got wind of her past, and the harassment began again. But with Ayanokoji-kun's intervention, she was saved. Even if it had all been part of a plan.

She told me about what happened in the first year— the fight on the rooftop against Ryuen-kun.

During the summer, I heard bits and pieces about this from Ibuki-san, but thanks to her poor memory, she left out large parts of the story. She didn't explain it in detail.

Although I knew Karuizawa-san had suffered violence from Ryuen-kun, I didn't know the full context. Now, piecing together the memories, I finally saw it all clearly.

Before I knew it, tears were slipping down my cheeks.

Partly out of sympathy for her tragic past. She pretended to be someone unpleasant just to protect herself— that was such a painful, difficult path.

But that's not exactly why I'm crying.

I had heard bits and pieces from Ibuki-san before—

*Why didn't I try to dig deeper back then?*

*"I... haven't learned anything from him at all..."*

Even though I was right by his side, acting like I knew everything about him.

*I was wrong.*

Maybe I understood him less than anyone else.

All Ayanokoji-kun ever showed me was his back. He never once turned around or waited for me to catch up.

“...So pathetic.”

*I'm so pathetic.*

It was as if I had been not much involved, yet I was the one feeling the most hurt. I just convinced myself that I was the victim.

"Me too."

Karuizawa-san said with a smile.

Her natural smile made my own expression relax involuntarily.

"I haven't smiled like this in a long time."

"Me neither."

Me and Karuizawa-san.

I always assumed our paths wouldn't cross.

But at this moment, she felt more closely connected to me than anyone else in the class.

I squeezed her hand back. Then, perhaps because Karuizawa-san's suppressed emotions also surged up. Tears welled up in her eyes.



"We both got involved with a troublesome person, didn't we?"

"Yeah, we really did... Really."

It would definitely be better not to get too deeply involved with him.

Now, I finally realized this clearly.

Except—

I can't bring myself to give up here.

"Now that it's come to this, I have no choice but to stubbornly face him. And, I will definitely graduate from Class A with everyone. I promise."

It won't be easy.

Now that he's become an enemy, graduating from Class A will be harder than ever. But I don't want to stop moving forward anymore.

"You really are amazing, Horikita-san."

"No, I'm weak. It's just that I've finally realized I'm not alone."

As long as I have allies, it's not impossible.

"Right... Then I guess it's time for me to get my act together too."

Karuizawa-san wiped her tears, stood up from the bench, and stretched her arms wide. Then she turned back, smiling again.

"Let's make him regret leaving our class."

"Yeah— We absolutely have to make him regret it."

At last, I took a step forward.

Both in reality and in my heart.



## Part 1

The special exam ended successfully with Class C and Class D emerging victorious.

After that, Shimazaki and the others held a simple welcome party at the Keyaki Mall.

By the time the celebrations came to an end, the sun had begun to set, and night was approaching. I let my classmates head back first and took a detour from the usual route, looking up at the sky as I walked, thinking about what comes next.

It'll likely be at least a few more weeks before the next special exam is announced. Normally, this gap period exists so students can reset and experience normal campus life.

But with each passing day, the remaining time steadily slips away. For third-year students, the issue of their future path constantly hangs over them.

One must realize it's not *just* April, but *already* April.

For the classes that are playing catch-up, there's no time to rest. So, now you need to play every card that you can.

It's necessary to consider every possibility. Just like preparing emergency food and disaster supplies in advance for potential disasters. Of course, it's best if they're never needed in the end.

In the evening glow, standing quietly by herself, leaning on the railing, was Kushida from Class A, whom I had called out here.





“Why did you pick this place to meet?”

I asked as I approached.

Kushida didn’t turn around. She simply answered:

“I remembered that back when we first enrolled, Ayanokoji-kun ended up seeing a lot of my... secrets.”

Her reply was vague, but there was no need to pry further. I let it pass.

“Right. I guess that happened.”

Kushida was under enormous pressure after running into Horikita, her old middle school classmate, at this school— and she kept all that pent-up inside. Those who once thought of her as a gentle person in class must have been startled by her true self. At the time, Kushida was even willing to use her own body— without a second thought— just to ensure others would stay quiet.

It’s only been two years since then, but it feels like ages. Strange how time works.

“That was an accident, but when you threatened me back then, I really didn’t know what to do.”

“Hard to say. You were probably already planning to take me down at that point, right?”

“Not at all. Really.”

Even though I said that, Kushida stole a quick glance at me, apparently still unconvinced.

When I first enrolled, I really was clueless about a lot of things— The complicated relationships that exist among people our age being one prime example.

In the White Room, those my age were eliminated one by one, disappearing from my sight. I spent a long time completely alone.

Until I came to this school, I had never once tried to grow closer to someone my own age— especially not someone of the opposite gender.

No... There was that one time before enrolling, when I ran into a girl who had been forced to leave the White Room.

Maybe I subconsciously considered it unimportant, because my memories of her are almost gone.

Flashes of unnecessary recollections and vague images from my childhood surfaced for an instant.

*What was that girl's name?*

*What did we talk about?*

*Or did we not talk at all?*

*I can hardly recall any of it.*

Maybe that's one drawback of investing all my brain power in studying.

Had I stayed in the White Room, I probably would've never realized this truth. After coming to this school, seeing so many sides of life,

I'm a little more curious about my past.

I wonder what that girl and the others are doing now. Some of them might be going through re-education, like Yagami.

“Why did you call me here?”

Noticing I had fallen silent, lost in thought, Kushida urged me to speak.

“I just wanted to ask how everyone in your class is doing. I was worried.”

“I find that hard to believe. If you cared, you wouldn't have transferred out.”

“True.”

“So, there's another reason, isn't there?”

I moved next to Kushida, leaning on the railing beside her, knowing how perceptive she was and got to the point.

“To close the gap with Class A, it will be easier if I had someone on the inside.”

“Huh? You're asking me to betray my class?”

“Exactly. I'll pay you in private points, as long as you produce results.”

I admitted it directly and Kushida let out a small laugh.

“Because of that private-point deal with you before, I ended up suffering a lot. You really think I’ll help you, *Ayanokoji-kun*— now that you’re our enemy?”

She made it clear she wasn’t interested, still not turning my way.

“Whether you help or not is your choice. But if you refuse, I can’t promise I’ll keep silent about everything.”

Kushida’s true nature is already exposed in Class A. But most students in other classes still don’t know.

“You really think you can threaten me like that? Even Ryuen-kun knows about my past.”

“Since it’s Ryuen, spreading nasty rumors about you will lack credibility.”

Even if Ryuen starts spreading the news about Kushida’s true nature, she can just pretend to be completely unaware of it. And Class A students wouldn’t go out of their way to side with Ryuen either.

“Isn’t the same true of you, *Ayanokoji-kun*? You transferred to another class on your own. Even if you tried to reveal my secrets, who would actually believe you?”

“That depends on how it’s done.”

“You’re saying... you think you can pull it off?”

“I’m not denying it.”

Kushida narrowed her eyes, not surprised. As if she expected that answer. Those eyes, gazing off into the distance— what else do they see?

“I bet you could easily beat that class led by a demoralized Horikita anyway, even without my help.”

“It’s not going to be that easy. Horikita will pull herself together soon.”

“Wow, Ayanokoji-kun, you unexpectedly rate that woman quite highly?”

It might be hard for Horikita to succeed alone, but with help from others, that’s another story. Sooner or later, she’ll become a major obstacle blocking the path of Class C or D.

“Also, if it becomes necessary to force expulsions in the future, that’s a different discussion.”

When I said that, Kushida finally turned to me for the first time, likely trying to grasp my real motive.

“Force someone out... from our class?”

“Can’t think of a solid reason to exclude your class from that.”

She must’ve realized that, with Kushida’s information as a starting point, I might orchestrate an expulsion in Class A.

“This sounds way too risky. Even if dragging down the class earns some private points, wouldn’t it defeat the purpose if I can’t graduate



from Class A in the end? Plus, if everyone found out I was in contact with Ayanokoji-kun, my image would be completely ruined.”

“Then you’ll just have to save enough personal points for a class transfer within the remaining year.”

“How much of that are you saying with a straight face?”

Her skepticism was obviously fake. She wasn’t really trying to find what’s true from my words. Did she decide my words were lies from the start— or she had some other reason. She was masking her real feelings so I couldn’t figure out which way she was leaning.

“You don’t have to decide right now. You can tell Horikita or anyone else about this if you want. Maybe you recorded this conversation on your phone— feel free to spread it around later. Might even boost unity in Horikita’s class.”

“What the heck? What exactly do you, Ayanokoji-kun, want to do? Are you trying to crush Class A or what?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not focusing on only one goal.”

I dodged the question without explaining further. Kushida didn’t seem interested in prying either.

“You’re really going your own way, huh. The special exam too— only you got a perfect score. Guess you don’t need to hide anymore.”

“That’s right.”

I’ve said everything I needed to say here today, so I consider that’s enough. I could wait for Kushida’s answer next time.

“...So, you’re the one who gave Ichinose’s class that suggestion about guessing three correct people?”

“I gave her a bit of help. Given Horikita’s mental state, I figured this latest exam would likely be led by Hirata. Yukimura probably believed he could manage, even if they hit him with a few penalty points. Wang Mei-Yu would volunteer to meet Hirata’s expectations. Horikita, as a leader, stood out too much, so she’d be left out— which doubled as a chance for her to take some rest. Koenji actually studies seriously in his own way, so you might think there was an opening to exploit. Something like that.”

“Weren’t you worried you would have to take the blame if your guess’s missed?”

“It’s all just predictions. I can’t guarantee they’ll be 100% right. But it’s better than picking five random people blindly, isn’t it?”

It helped that Ichinose was out gathering intel herself, learning about whom Hirata had called together for discussion and what strategies they had. It wasn’t my effort alone.

That’s why Ichinose was willing to accept my suggestion.

If one side blindly relied on the other, that collaboration wouldn’t have held up.

Suddenly, my phone vibrated. I took it out to check who it was.

“Who is it?”



“Hashimoto, calling me back to the dorms to continue the welcome party.”

“This time, you showed your worth in the special exam and got official recognition from Class C, huh?”

“Something like that.”

“Hey.”

I turned to leave, but Kushida called after me again.

“What?”

“You’ll really get those private points ready for me if I say yes?”

“Of course. Once you agree, I’ll let you know how much before you betray them. If you think it’s not enough, you can decline at any time. But right now, we’re not at a point where it’s necessary— my class is short on funds too.”

At the moment, we don’t have enough to make an offer she will find tempting.

“I’ll think it over a bit.”

“Sure. I’m not setting a deadline.”

I took a few steps, then felt her gaze on my back and turned around.

She was gripping the railing, quietly watching me.

“I don’t want to... but I do acknowledge you, Ayanokoji-kun.”

Before I could reply, she looked away.

“That’s all. I just wanted to let you know.”

“I see. Then I’ll see you later.”

It felt like there was some hidden meaning behind those words, but there was no need to focus on it now.

It’s up to Kushida now whether she chooses to prioritize herself or the class. Offering her the choice also adds one more thing to look forward to in the future.

## Epilogue: What Awaits Ahead

The day after my meeting with Kushida and the end of the welcome party—

There was still one remaining issue in class.

I wanted to settle things quickly with a particular classmate, but unexpectedly, he reached out to me first. He sent me a “*love call*” saying he wanted to meet right away, so I left the classroom.

Out in the hallway, students heading home were starting to appear one after another. When I passed by Hondo and Okitani from my former class, they both averted their eyes. The reactions seemed to include not only the transfer but also the results of the exam. Their impression of me seemed to be gradually changing.

I paid no special attention to them and continued on towards the entrance. Upon leaving the school, I headed straight for the dorm.

“Ah—”

On the way, I ran into Utomiya and Tsubaki, who were walking in my direction.

“...Hello.”

Utomiya, unable to hide his 'this is annoying' attitude, gave me a slight nod in greeting.

“Haven't seen you two together in a while.”

“We’re not actually together all the time.” Tsubaki replied calmly.

Since I had nothing in particular to say, I decided to walk past them without stopping.

“Seems like you've become quite the topic. There’s some rumours about you switching classes.”

She said it casually and didn’t seem much interested in the topic.

“Yeah, it’s definitely unusual to move from Class A to Class C after all the effort it took to get to A.”

“Well, the *unusual* here is *you*, senpai. Right?”

“Perhaps.”

The last time I spoke with Tsubaki was during the training camp, early in the morning where we had a brief chat. We had chatted about who we would want to see when we graduated. But Horikita and Ibuki had woken up and interrupted us halfway through, so our conversation ended on a bit of a cliffhanger.

Since then, we haven’t had the chance to talk properly. Even now, Tsubaki showed no sign of wanting to pick up where we left off, implying it wasn’t all that important.

“Well, we’ve got places to be, so let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

I had my own appointment and couldn’t stand around for long anyway.

Right as we passed each other, Tsubaki glanced at me with a look as if she had something to say but couldn't.

I felt an odd feeling of déjà vu.

“Tsubaki Sakurako...”

*A memory I'd forgotten.*

*An unnecessary memory.*

But that's how humans are— mysteriously capable of dragging out even unnecessary memories from the past.

“What's up? Hearing my full name out of nowhere is a bit scary.”

*Did I say it out loud?*

Tsubaki had turned around and was looking at me, slightly annoyed.

Maybe “scary” was an overstatement, but having someone call you by your full name can be unsettling. Back then, when I met Morishita, I felt a similar discomfort.

“I just remembered our conversation at the training camp.”

“Oh? Surprised you still remember. That talk was basically irrelevant for you, right?”

“What did you say to him?”

“It's nothing, Utomiya-kun.”

After being pointed out so harshly, Utomiya looked away uncomfortably.

“Right— our conversation ended halfway.”

“True. Though I doubt it matters to you, senpai...”

“Actually, someone’s face other than my family’s has come to mind recently— someone I’d like to see. It’s thanks to our chat during training camp that I thought of it, so... just letting you know.”

“...So, not a family member? Who is it?”

I figured my comment was too vague and might confuse Tsubaki. But she asked anyway.

“Well... If I had to give a close equivalent, maybe you can call her a childhood friend?”

Yes— someone from the White Room, a girl around my age, whose name I’d nearly forgotten.

*Her name was Yuki.*

Though I’m not entirely sure. But somehow, the word “yuki-tsubaki” came to mind.

*[TL Note: Yuki-tsubaki (ユキツバキ / 雪椿) translates to "snow camellia" in English. It refers to a type of camellia flower (Camellia rusticana) that thrives in snowy regions of Japan. Also Yuki (雪) directly translates to Snow. ]*

Maybe Tsubaki's presence resembles hers in some ways, and that acted as a trigger to stir my memories.

That's my guess, at least.

But... was it really just a coincidence?

*"Do you like Yuki, senpai?"*

That was what Tsubaki had asked me at the training camp. Back then, it didn't feel out of place, but now it seems different.

"...If you do get to meet her, what'll you do?"

Tsubaki, who had shown no interest before, pressed on.

"In reality, we probably won't meet again. It's just... nostalgia, I guess. That's why I said I wanted to meet."

Past and present— Would things be different if we met?

But it's probably better if we don't. I was merely curious if things might be changed.

That said, the essence likely wouldn't change. I doubt any new feelings would emerge.

Whether that girl has any relation to Tsubaki is probably a meaningless question.

## Part 1

The person called me to meet near the garbage collection area behind the dorms. Even though it wasn't long after school, this place was deserted. When I arrived, the person seemed to have been waiting in the shadows for quite some time.

“Sorry. Hope I didn’t keep you long.” I spoke quietly and he stepped out of the shadows.

“...You really came. I thought you might run away.”

The one who spoke was a Class C student, Kito Hayato. Ever since I transferred, I hadn’t exchanged a single word with him until now.

“I see it as my duty to respond if a classmate calls.”

“...Already acting like a leader, huh?”

“I don’t want you to misunderstand. The class decided, for now, to let me take the lead. But it seems you don’t agree, Kito.”

I wouldn’t say I’m friends with Kito, but we aren’t enemies either. I think that at least before the transfer, we were on such good terms that we could exchange greetings without any problems.

“I don’t acknowledge you as any kind of leader.”

“Well, you’re not exactly making it easy to talk and you won’t make eye contact either. Is it because you don't plan on recognizing anyone other than Sakayanagi?”

“No... it’s not about Sakayanagi.”



“Then, that’s odd. Why did you obey Sakayanagi so much?”

“Since I couldn’t lead the class myself, someone else had to step up. When it came down to choosing Katsuragi or Sakayanagi, I simply picked the one more likely to get us the result— someone who could get us to graduate as Class A. That’s all there was to it.”

After saying that, Kito’s expression grew more irritated.

“But... in the end, Sakayanagi just did whatever she wanted. She didn’t really care what happened to Class A. As long as it was fun for her, that was all that mattered. And as long as she delivered results, I didn’t mind...”

For Kito, who wasn't good with words, it didn't matter if the person leading him to graduate from Class A was Sakayanagi, Katsuragi, or even a third party. It was just that Sakayanagi had a relatively higher probability of success. He wanted to say he had no personal preference and was just making calm judgments based solely on benefit.

“But relying on someone else left the class to where it is now.”

“It's not my place to say, but from my perspective, because Sakayanagi acted on her own, the class went down two ranks, nearly ending up at the bottom. It’s only natural that you will be unhappy.”

“I get the feeling you’re the same as Sakayanagi— someone who doesn’t care whether the class graduates as A or not.”

“True, I also act like that, which must seem troublesome in Kito's eyes. But at the very least, I intend to improve the current class so it can seize the chance to rise to Class A. Isn't that enough?”

“I don't buy it.”

So this time, Kito isn't using a simple pros & cons approach. He wants to get involved and see for himself.

“I want to confirm with my own eyes whether you can be trusted.”

With that, Kito tugged up his black leather gloves and clenched his fists.

“I know you're strong... Show me... Try suppressing my dissatisfaction with force.”

He's not looking for a plan or analyzing the strategies behind the special exams. No matter what fancy tactics I show, he won't be convinced. But if I demonstrate raw strength, that'll satisfy him.

“So you and Ryuen are alike in how you operate. That does simplify things. If that's how you want it, I'll cooperate. But first, there's one thing you need to keep in mind.”

Kito, who had entered a fighting stance, looked confused by my statement.

“Keep in mind...? What do you mean?”

“I know you're not good at conversation, but you should have enough confidence in your physical strength. In that case, when Ryuen entered the classroom, you should have acted before anyone else”

“You wanted me to fight Ryuen?”

“No. If you had acted quickly, you could have prevented Sawada from being mistreated. In that situation, there was a possibility she could have been injured.”

But back then, when Sawada was near Ryuen, Kito just sat there without moving.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I haven’t even admitted you—”

“That reason is childish. Even Koenji sometimes steps in to protect classmates. I’m not saying men should protect women because it’s chivalrous. But as classmates, strong people have no reason not to protect the weak.”

“Classmates...? Then there’s no problem if I don’t consider them classmates, right?”

“If you really think so, that’s fine. But if that’s the case, Class C has no use for Kito Hayato.”

Making demands one-sidedly without contributing. Unless you hide unfathomable strength, such things cannot be permitted. If that's not the case, then you just need to be expelled.

“Fine. If you beat me here, I’ll listen to you from now on— assuming you can actually win.”

Immediately after saying that, Kito swung out his long arm towards my collar. Before his hand could grab me, I grabbed his wrist, stopping him.

He didn't panic, instead, he tried to pull me forward along with his captured arm. His intention was to land a blow first, destroy my fighting spirit— I predicted this before he even moved.

Most people would have been done by that single blow, filled with intimidation.

“Wha—?!”

Realizing he couldn't drag me easily, Kito brushed my arm away.

He didn't rush in for a follow-up attack but instead watched me carefully. He's used to fighting— his instincts likely warn him when he's in danger.

After a moment, he closed the distance again, stomping his foot provocatively.

“When most people see me stare, they feel disgust or fear.”

He wasn't just emphasizing his strength, but also saying self-mockery about people fearing his intimidating appearance.

“Unfortunately, I'm not interested in such superficial things.”

My lack of interest must have annoyed him. He looked at me with a sharp stare, then rushed forward, swinging his right fist. It cut the air with a whoosh— A direct hit with no wasted movement.

I lightly stepped back and dodged it easily.

He repeated this two or three times, but each time I avoided him the same way.

Kito stopped, dissatisfied.

“...Why won’t you fight back...?”

“Who knows?”

I dodged the question, and he clicked his tongue before lunging again. This time, focusing on his left side— but he still couldn’t land a blow.

Against someone like Kito, whose main weapon is his long arms, the usual strategy is to move inside his reach for close combat. But Kito understood that, so I couldn’t simply rush in. He realized my movements were different from his expectations, and I showed no signs of counterattacking, so his irritation grew.

This time, he attempted a kick. Just before his foot connected with my abdomen, I avoided it, leaving him off-balance. Not letting this chance slip, I lightly pushed Kito's body with my palm.

“Ugh...?!”

Kito lost his balance and took a step back.

Compared to Ryuen, who attacks from every angle in unpredictable ways, Kito’s kicks are more straightforward. However, his upper-body moves are more practiced than Ryuen’s and he understands how to use his long arms effectively.

As he tried to regain his footing, I took that moment to drive my left fist sharply into his stomach—

Pain. Silence.

He had let his guard down, assuming I still wouldn't counter.

Fearing I will hit the same spot again, Kito immediately clutched his abdomen with both arms. But I only intended that single punch, no follow-up. Flexible arms are ineffective against this opponent. This message must have been fully conveyed to Kito.

However, Kito immediately bent his knees and readjusted his fighting stance. He's not going down easily. Even though the short exchange must have told him how big the gap in our strength is, he's still not giving up.

Before his brain could catch up and tell him it was hopeless, Kito spread his arms wide and tried to grab me again.

Handling his long arms would be simple, but I let him grab hold this time. His big hands, using all ten of his fingers, gripped my neck, forcing me back against the wall with the momentum.

Normally, to escape a situation like this, you would grab the attacker's arms. But that's the wrong approach— it's not easy to remove them.

Instead, I spread my arms wide, clapping both hands forcefully on his ears with his head caught in between. It was unexpected and ears are a vulnerable spot.

Kito let out a groan, releasing me as he retreated.

I seized the moment and kicked forward, slamming his knee.

“Ghh...!”

It was a solid blow that made his face twist in pain. He knelt down on one knee, but he still refused to collapse, insisting the fight wasn't over.

“You’re... so strong... Is this... how big the difference is...?”

“You’re strong too, but you should learn how to use that strength properly. Violence isn’t really necessary for everyday school life, but there are times when something uncontrollable might threaten a classmate’s safety. I want you to protect them. In return, I promise I’ll lead Class C until we can practically reach Class A.”

“...I’m not gonna trust you just like that.”

“That’s fine. As time goes by, you’ll see results soon enough.”

Kito showed no fear and returned my gaze intensely.

I held out my hand.

“Aren’t you worried that I might grab that hand and forcibly drag you down eventually?”

“I’ll consider that as one of the things I look forward to.”

After my answer, Kito nodded slightly and took my hand.







A new chapter has begun for Class C. Being a little rough never hurts. If there's someone who wants to talk, we'll talk. If there's someone who values strength, we'll settle it with strength.

Bridging the distance with each classmate in the best way possible—that's the ideal.

Whatever it takes, I'm ready to handle it.

## Part 2

After school, Ayanokoji left the classroom.

The moment Morishita saw him go, she stood up and poked her tablet's stylus into Hashimoto's left shoulder— who was staring at his phone in his seat.

It wasn't just a gentle poke, more like a forceful thrust.

As Hashimoto turned around with a pained expression, Morishita shot him a look, signalling him to follow. Then she walked alone into the hallway.

A moment later, Hashimoto stepped out of the classroom, holding his left shoulder with his right hand.

“That hurt, Morishita. Try a calmer way to call me over—”

“I'll cut straight to the point. Please go out with me.”

*[TL Note: Morishita here uses the phrase - 「付き合ってください」 “tsukiatte kudasai.” This can have two meanings. "Please go out with me" or "Please accompany me." Without additional context, it is often interpreted as a romantic confession.]*

“...Eeh?”

The shock from her words made him forget the pain for an instant, and Hashimoto's eyes went wide.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, you're bold... Wait, you like me of all people...?”

“Huh? You totally misunderstood that. I mean I want you to come with me to the student council room.”

“You left out the key detail: The destination. That had to be on purpose.”

“You’ve got this lecherous look on your face, imagining me as a girlfriend or even fantasizing that I’m naked under my clothes, letting you do this or *that*. As your classmate, I think we need some distance.”

“Where did that whole speech come from? Well, relax. You’re not my type.”

“Even if you say so, men are basically animals. There's an old saying, ‘It's a man's shame not to eat what's served right before him.’ You're trying to adapt that saying to modern times, aren't you?”

“I told you, I have no intention of that... Anyway, if you want me to come with you, act more polite, will you? Actually, why me in the first place? You could go see the student council yourself. I have no business there.”

Morishita clearly disliked and distrusted Hashimoto, which he himself realized perfectly well.

“If you’re lonely going alone, then ask Ayanokoji for help.”

“He seemed like he couldn't hold his bladder and left very early.”

“Really? Well, there’s always tomorrow—”

“I can’t wait. There’s something I can’t put off any longer. I want to see how Horikita Suzune is doing.”

“...Horikita? Did something happen to her?”

For the first time, Hashimoto seemed a bit interested in Morishita’s doings. The pain had subsided somewhat, and Hashimoto lowered the hand resting on his shoulder.

“She lost to Ichinose’s class in yesterday’s special exam. I want to check her state of mind first. If Ayanokoji Kiyotaka showed up, it would complicate things— What I want to see isn’t her being shaken up because of the transfer.”

“Well, it's true. If you bring Ayanokoji, she might close herself off even more because of the transfer thing. It will become less about the special exam result and more about the problem before that.”

“That’s why I thought of you, Hashimoto Masayoshi. You have some connection with Horikita, right? Use that silver tongue of yours to get us some info.”

“I can take that statement as a compliment, right?”

“Of course. Because it's an area traitors excel in.”

“There you go again with that... All right, I don’t really have plans, so I’ll tag along.”

“Even if Hashimoto Masayoshi is thinking of using this as an opportunity to get closer to me, my feelings for you won’t increase by even a millimeter, so don’t get your hopes up.”

“I’m telling you, I’m not—”

Morishita started walking, urging him with her actions to "get moving." Just then, a voice came from behind the two.

“Mind if I come, too?”

It was Shiraishi, with narrowed eyes, looking quite intrigued.

“Shiraishi!? Since when...?”

“I saw the two of you sneaking off and curiosity got the better of me.”

“Sorry, but we didn’t plan to bring you, Shiraishi Asuka.”

“A secret mission, huh? But we’re classmates, right? We’re supposed to be partners.”

Facing Morishita's sudden cold words, Shiraishi remained unfazed, responding smoothly.

“I’m not that close to you, so I don’t want you tagging along.”

“Oh my, So then Hashimoto-kun *is* someone you’re close with?”

“Of course not— but the level is different. Like the difference between the toilet seat and what’s inside it.”

“Morishita, should I assume I’m the seat? Though even the seat is pretty gross.”

“Morishita and I have both spent two years basically leaving everything to Sakayanagi, just watching from the sidelines. There’s nothing strange if we decide to move for the class now.”

Shiraishi wasn't annoyed at being compared to the "inside" of a toilet and calmly pressed on.

"You have an annoying look in your eyes and are acting so willfully."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"All right, we don't want to bump into Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, so let's go right now."

Morishita led the way, stepping off with their unwelcome tag-along guest, Shiraishi.

"By the way, Shiraishi, you, Yoshida, and Nishikawa took Ayanokoji to karaoke once, right?"

"Yeah. I thought we needed a chance to deepen friendship between the class members."

"At this point, I'm not surprised you'd invite a guy. But you're not going to make a move on him, are you?"

"Is there a rule against messing around with Ayanokoji-kun?"

"Not exactly, but you should best give up. You'll end up burned."

"If I do, that's fine. That might be fun in its own way."

With that frank reply, Shiraishi continued:

"Anyway, his first performance was pretty brilliant, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, he certainly had a dream start. Not only did he secure a safe win, but he used Ryuen as well and instantly established a major

presence in the class. Couldn't ask for a stronger ally."

Hashimoto laughed happily. Morishita turned and spoke to him in a low voice:

"I'm a bit scared, Hashimoto Masayoshi."

"Huh? What's there to be scared about?"

"I'm afraid of Ayanokoji Kiyotaka. When he was with us, he always chose his words carefully. If there are any enemies around, he won't talk. He uses clueless classmates— us— in his plans. He even advised Ichinose Honami so Horikita Suzune's class would lose. He's someone who can bare his fangs at old friends without hesitation."

"That's natural, isn't it?. It would have been more annoying if he went easy on them just because they were once his classmates."

"I agree. But isn't he a bit too cold? Even if his goal is to gain control of Class C down the line, it feels like there's no 'heart' in what he does."

"You're overthinking it. He's not some robot. He just doesn't show his emotions much. But that doesn't mean he doesn't have them."

"*'Doesn't show them much'* is just superficial, isn't it?"

"...What are you trying to say?"

"You may not care, but I'll warn you anyway: our partnership with him is just an alignment of interests. We only brought him in because we had no choice from a strategic angle. And to him, we're just tools. Don't forget that."

Morishita suddenly showed a serious expression and opinion. Her opinion... no, it should be called an analysis, made Hashimoto clear his throat slightly. Meanwhile Shiraishi, who hadn't participated in their back-and-forth, just listened quietly.

“...Got it. I don't change my approach to whoever I'm dealing with, and that won't change in the future.”

“That's fine. Just don't get too involved.”

“You know, How can you even say that to other people? You've always preferred to be alone, and now you're really into Ayanokoji.”

Hashimoto teased Morishita with a smirk, she then slightly widened her eyes and walked to the window.

“Could it be... by any chance... possibly... *love*?”

“Indeed. The fish in that pond near the head teacher's office are *koi*.”

*[TL Note: Here Morishita & Shiraishi use a pun. In the phrase "コイ" (koi), can mean "koi" (the fish) but also sounds like "恋" (koi), meaning "love" or "romance." In Japanese, these two words are homophones— they are pronounced the same way ("koi") but have different meanings and kanji.]*

Looking at Morishita gazing down from the window, Shiraishi calmly replied.

“Wow, Shiraishi Asuka, you're keeping up with my comedy routine.”

“...That was good, Shiraishi.”

“No, not really.”



“All right, no more nonsense. Let’s hurry to the student council.”

Muttering to herself, Morishita walked on as if nothing had happened, with Hashimoto and Shiraishi right behind.

“Anyway, Shiraishi Asuka, you’re really interested in Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, aren’t you?”

“Wouldn’t it be weird not to be curious? He’s that oddball who transferred to a lower class even though he’d reached Class A. And yet he’s undeniably skilled— plus, his voice is really nice, don’t you think?”

“His voice? Eh, whatever. As I said before, be careful not to get burned.”

“Which is exactly why it’s exciting.”

“...Because it’s dangerous?”

Even Morishita, who was always laid-back, seemed surprised for once.

“Don’t mind me. So why exactly are we heading for the student council?”

“Process of elimination. Going to her classroom is too conspicuous, so are the cafe or catching her on the way back. The dorm is impossible because showing up in a group would make her cautious. But the student council room is different. Only a few people can go in during working hours, and we can more easily observe her genuine state.”

Soon, the three reached the student council’s floor.

“Shall we just knock and go in?”

“That depends on the situation—”

“Oops—”

They arrived right as the door to the student council room opened. All three reflexively hid behind a corner.

Whether or not they actually needed to hide was unclear, but it was reflex, as if they felt guilty and did it on instinct.

“Look at you, Nanase-san— you’re really reliable.”

The hidden trio silently peeked at the figures of Student Council President Horikita and the second-year student council secretary, Nanase.

“Not at all. You guided me well, President Horikita.”

Although on the surface it could have sounded sarcastic, there was no such impression. She spoke with straightforward sincerity— her words came from the heart.

Upon enrolling, Nanase had been placed in Class D, after a year, she was still in D. Luckily, they weren’t too far behind the upper classes point-wise. The bigger issue was Hosen monopolizing the leadership role, and Horikita believed Nanase’s strengths were being wasted.

If Nanase took command, they could likely aim higher. However, for Horikita, a third-year, to say such things was somewhat inappropriate. But even so, putting aside fairness, the emotion of wanting to offer

slight support welled up from the bottom of Horikita's heart. It was only human.

“Nanase-san, you’re aiming for Class A too, right?”

“Yes, I am. Of course, I want to graduate from Class A. But I think the most important thing is to enjoy school life.”

“Because you can rely on your own strengths for higher education or job prospects?”

Just from her OAA stats, Nanase’s academic scores were excellent. Her attitude towards life was also perfect. As long as she didn't aim too high, any choice or opportunity could be easily grasped.

“I’m nowhere near that level... By the way— can I ask about Ayanokoji-senpai?”

Horikita didn’t look especially surprised. Ayanokoji’s transfer— it’s natural that anyone who knows him, even an underclassman, would be curious.

“You can, but I don't know much either. Because he transferred without saying anything.”

“He didn’t even tell you, Horikita-senpai... That must be rough.”

“Even if I pretend otherwise, it’s not easy. But it’s done— no changing it now. I’ll have to move forward one step at a time.”

Ayanokoji’s transfer and the defeat in the special exam— But Horikita looked more upbeat than expected.

“Would you like to grab a coffee at Keyaki Mall afterward?”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

“In that case, could we meet up later? I need to call a friend first and tell him something.”

“All right. Should I wait here? Or should I head over first?”

“This time of day, the cafe will be busy, so it’s probably better if senpai go ahead and get some seats.”

“You’re right. Okay, I’ll do that.”

“All right, Horikita-senpai. See you soon.”

Hiding in the corner, the three eavesdropped on their exchange.

Fortunately, Horikita went down the other staircase, not toward them, so they were safe for the moment.

Nanase watched Horikita leave and pulled her phone from her pocket.



“Hello?”

It seemed someone had picked up right away. Nanase started talking:

“I thought we agreed no contact unless it was necessary? Tsukishiro-san.”

The three of them, uninterested at first, exchanged looks at the mention of that name.

“I’m aware of that. As planned I will monitor Ayanokoji-senpai for another year. But I’m still curious about Ishigami Kyo. Just As expected, he’s not merely intelligent and curious— he’s been given some special role, like me. Also... there’s a first-year who caught my attention. I doubt there’s a connection, but... are you involved with them?”

She went on speaking in a way that didn’t sound like a typical student council matter.

“All right then... If it does come to that—”

With her free hand, Nanase pulled out a second phone from her pocket.

“Sorry, something just came up, so let’s leave it here.”

Just as it seemed the conversation was about to continue, Nanase suddenly ended the call.

“Horikita-senpai? What’s wrong? ...Ah, I see. Got it. I’ll be there in ten minutes. Yes, yes. Excuse me.”



Nanase was on two phones at once: one in her right hand, the other in her left. By school rules, students are allowed only a single phone.

They were seeing something they shouldn't have. The trio stopped eavesdropping, intending to slip away— but in that tiny movement, they made a soft sound.

In the silent hallway, even a small noise carried.

*Has she noticed them? Or has she not?*

It was hard to move either way now. They just prayed she would go the other way like Horikita had...

A few seconds later—

“*Senpais*, what are you doing in a place like this?”

Nanase appeared silently beside the three hiding around the corner and spoke to them.

“Ah!? No— we were just, uh, looking for Horikita— Right?”

“Y-Yeah, we just got here. Is something the matter?”

“Huh. Horikita-senpai headed down that other staircase about a minute ago. If you hurry, you might catch her. *Hashimoto-senpai*, *Morishita-senpai*, and *Shiraishi-senpai*.”

Nanase smiled faintly, stating the names of all three without hesitation.

“You know me?”

“Yes. I am on the student council, after all. I have a basic grasp of who’s who among the *senpais*.”

She shifted her gaze toward Shiraishi briefly, as if assessing her, then looked away before it got awkward.

“All right. Well, *senpais*, if you’ll excuse me.”

With that, Nanase bowed deeply and headed down the stairs.

“Gah, that was terrifying. I was sweating bullets.”

“I hope we weren't found out. By the way... she had two phones.”

“And Tsukishiro— *that* Tsukishiro? What is up with this second-year?”

“She also mentioned Ayanokoji Kiyotaka by name. Looks like we’ve got something big brewing. As someone whose grandfather is a great detective, my inherited detective blood is boiling.”

“That has to be a lie. So what do we do? How about tailing Nanase right now?”

“I think it would be best to stop. She seems quite sensitive to her surroundings.”

Shiraishi muttered as she gazed down the stairs where Nanase had disappeared.



# Shiraishi Asuka: The Secret She Carries

Holding onto unsettled feelings, Shiraishi arrived at school earlier than anyone else.

In the quiet classroom, she sat at her own seat, and then shifted her gaze to the seat on her left, still without its occupant. Since yesterday, that seat has been assigned to a certain student.

From Class 1-D to Class 3-A. And then from Class 3-A to Class 3-C. She didn't understand that person's true intentions.

*Did he decide to transfer to become a savior, or was there more to it than what meets the eye?*

Either way, for Shiraishi, it was completely unexpected.

“This is troubling, isn't it.”

Only after saying it aloud did she realize that she herself was troubled.

“I—”

*What did she herself want to do?*

She had learned of Ayanokoji's transfer, and now that it's actually been carried out, she needs to face it.

*A feeling she cannot express.*

No, that was wrong. She understood, but pretended not to.

“.....Problems are piling up, aren't they.”

Starting up her tablet and taking the pen in hand, she began drawing a picture of one person there. The one she drew was precisely that person at the center of it all.

What kind of face did he have, what gestures did he often make? She still didn't know well. From now on, throughout the year, she would probably become much better at drawing him. She would hear his voice, and probably get to know him.

“No, therefore that's...”

Once again, she catches herself thinking. She had to try not to think about it.

This secret..... These feelings could not be known by others. Shiraishi kept that firmly in mind.

*Feelings she had discarded many years ago.*

*Why, now of all times, were things turning out like this?*

“.....I'm... foolish, aren't I?”

Just as she finished her thoughts, the opening of the door made her turn in surprise at the unexpected person standing there.

“Morning.”

That person noticed Shiraishi and greeted her.

“Good morning.”

After returning the greeting, Shiraishi calmed herself down.

With a natural movement, she deleted the picture she had started drawing on the tablet and pretended she had been studying.

“Didn't expect someone to be here before me. You're early.”

“—Right, I ended up getting up earlier than usual. But you're pretty early yourself, Ayanokoji-kun.”

“For me, it’s basically like transferring to a new school. Rather than being welcomed by others, I prefer to come in first and welcome them.”

"It’s quite a funny coincidence, don’t you think, Ayanokoji-kun? Two neighbors, alone in this quiet classroom, both came early."

"Yeah, Maybe so."

It was a voice with little fluctuation. But, that doesn’t mean that it was completely devoid of emotion.

Shiraishi listened intently, letting Ayanokoji's voice become familiar to her body.

*Silence fell.*

Wanting to hear more of his voice, Shiraishi spoke up.

“Why did you decide to transfer here anyway, Ayanokoji-kun?”

“You worked so hard to rise to Class A, so it’s hard to believe you’d go to a lower-ranked Class C.”

“Ordinarily, it does seem that way.”

His voice remains calm, as always.

Or perhaps it's to keep his emotions from being read.

In his elusive, cloud-like voice, Shiraishi almost felt like she might show her joy.

“Then... if it's not ‘ordinary,’ why did you transfer?”

And so, she continues.

Even though she knows she shouldn't probe further, she does so anyway.

A faint recollection of her bitter past crosses her mind.

While deeply reflecting that she will never repeat her mistakes again.

## Morishita Ai: Gatling Gun

For this life or death fight I was fully prepared.

For the sake of ending this war, I must pull the trigger.

*FIRE!.....*

As soon as I told myself that in my heart, I flicked a large bullet (a piece of eraser dust) with the index finger of my right hand. It flew straight ahead, and its target was right in front of me.

The target was the back of the head of the evil giant sitting in front of me, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka.

*Impact!*

The first shot struck near the top.

*As expected, it seems that a single shot isn't enough to cause any damage.*

As the commander, I placed several bullets (eraser shavings) that I had prepared in advance on the palm of my hand.

*I shall show you the strongest weapon of my army. Gatling Gun— Unleash!*

This time, I consecutively shot out several eraser shavings (bullets).

*There's no doubt I must be inflicting damage on the target...*

Just as I was about to check the extent of the damage, the giant target moved and turned around.

“Is there a problem?”

My practical experience, its richness, is not something to be taken lightly. Of course, I anticipated that the opponent would notice my attack.

“No, Nothing...”

“Please don't turn around during class. Even for self-study, that's what bad students do. Just do your work properly.”

After making him face forward, he seemed slightly troubled, but it looks like he quickly returned to studying.

Well then, shall I resume the attack?

*Pesh pesh!*

When I fired the Gatling gun again, the enemy, having raised their alert level, swiftly turned around with more speed than I had anticipated. Tch... I made sure to hide the eraser properly, but I hope he didn't see it...

“Staring at my face from up close? You're a total pervert.”

I said that to divert attention, making sure the focus wouldn't be on my left hand, which was gripping the eraser.

“That's not what I was trying to do at all. By the way— are you doing something to the back of my head?”

“No. I'm just doing my assignment like I should.”

I managed to get through it somehow. While somehow keeping the damage under control, I have to defeat him.

However, at that time, I had no way of knowing. That it wasn't just Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, but there was also an enemy next to him as well.

## Ibuki Mio: Worried?

Ibuki held a certain dissatisfaction. It wasn't about losing the special exam, or that Ryuen's strategy was seen through by Ayanokoji and used against them.

Well, that was dissatisfying too, but more than that... there was something that caused her even greater dissatisfaction.

And that was Horikita Suzune.

When she heard about Ayanokoji's transfer and learned Horikita had become depressed, she held her stomach and laughed.

However, that joy didn't last long. Gradually, it began to stress her out because Ibuki, who was short on money, had relied on Horikita's cooking to keep her stomach satisfied— and Horikita had now abandoned that “duty” by refusing to cook.

No matter how many times Ibuki tried visiting her room or calling, she couldn't get a proper response.

And today, Class A lost the special exam.

While that itself was good news for Ibuki's class, personally, she couldn't simply celebrate.

With this Horikita would sink even further into depression. And if that happened, who knew when she would cook again?

“...Why do I have to worry so much?”



After school, Ibuki paced back and forth near the entrance, growing irritated at Horikita for not coming out. She decided that when Horikita did appear, she would put a stop to it all— and force her to cook.

Those were her one-sided thoughts. Yet no matter how long she waited, there was no sign of Horikita coming out.

Then Ibuki went to check the shoe lockers and saw that Horikita's shoes were still there, so she hadn't gone home.

“Hurry up and come out already. Do you have any idea how worried... No, I'm not worried!”

A strange feeling emerged in her, so she pushed it out of her head.

*Because she hadn't eaten anything delicious lately, her thinking was getting weird.*

She concluded that was it.

After that, for perhaps another 30 minutes or so, she paced back and forth in the same area.

“Ah... there she is.”

At last, Horikita emerged from the school building.

There was no energy in her, as expected, not even a shred of spirit could be felt.

*You shouldn't kick anyone, but if you absolutely must kick someone, you have no choice but to find someone who would enjoy being kicked or someone for whom being kicked would lead to a positive outcome. If such a strange person exists, that is.*

Recalling those words from Katsuragi as she watched Horikita's depressing figure, Ibuki felt a sudden impulse and broke into a run.

The only thing she could do now was deliver a merciless kick to Horikita's back. That was all that was left in her power.

# Haruka Hasebe: A Source of Support

Late Thursday night, as the clock neared 1:00 AM.

I, Hasebe Haruka, sat in front of my computer, quietly waiting for that time.

What's running through my mind is— well... Ayanokoji-kun's transfer.

At the celebration we had at the end of spring break, he looked the same as ever. But I can't say how he felt on the inside.

Even days after the opening ceremony, the class was in chaos, and many still couldn't grasp the situation.

Even Horikita-san hadn't known anything about his transfer.

Could it be—

“...My fault?”

I can't help thinking that way. Because after Airi was expelled, I held a grudge against Ayanokoji-kun. I thought he had trampled on her feelings— and on our group's feelings, too.

I still don't know how he really feels. But... in order to survive at this school, sometimes you have to sacrifice something. At least, I've learned that much.

So I'm honestly not very surprised that he chose to transfer.

“As if... That's just being arrogant, isn't it?”

I had antagonized Ayanokoji-kun, yet I also wanted our group to start over again.

It's not like he transferred because he became fed up with my selfish words.

I'm sure it's something beyond my understanding.

He has his own way of thinking— a perspective unique to him alone.

As the clock hit 1:00 AM, the screen automatically switched. A cheaply made title screen appeared, and along with audience applause, two male hosts were shown. A comedy duo that's been getting a bit popular lately.

Even though I have school in the morning, I've stayed up late just for this.

Every Thursday night at this time, there's a show called "Aspiring Idols" broadcasted online.

Ten aspiring idols are invited into a studio to tackle various challenges proposed by the show, while viewers vote for them online. And once every two months, whoever comes in first place "graduates" from the show and receives a new job offer. Conversely, whoever places last is eliminated and replaced by a new aspiring idol.

Apparently, it's a fairly long-running program that's already past its third anniversary. However, I only started watching it a few months ago. Specifically, after someone I know joined as an aspiring idol.

They assign numbers, with lower numbers being the more senior participants. The person I'm interested in is wearing No. 9.

“Well then, without further ado, here's our first challenge! Tada! The ‘Piping-Hot Oden Reaction Battle’!”

One of the hosts flips over a roughly scrawled card with the challenge written on it.

The girl— who first appeared on the show last week, was still practically unknown. But in the first popularity poll, she achieved 6th place marking a solid debut. Her talking skills are far from good, but her honesty and dedication to tackling any challenge has earned her some devoted fans.

I watch the screen intently, waiting for her turn. She looks nervous as she watches the other contestants' reactions.

“Mind if I talk to you for a second?”

I speak softly to the screen.

“Yeah, that's right. He ended up transferring.”

I was talking to myself. Knowing it wouldn't reach her.

It's been a while since we last saw each other face-to-face. But the feelings of the girl on the other side of the screen haven't changed.

I remembered last week's challenge.

*“Tell us about your first love.”*

To that, she had spoken her honest feelings with an embarrassed face.

It was someone she met in her first year of high school, and she still has a crush on him to this day.

Viewed objectively, it's a painful memory. It could've been something she would never want to recall. But rather than letting it get her down, she's facing forward and moving on.

I used to think I was the one walking a step ahead, taking her by the hand. But, before I knew it, she was the one walking ahead.

She's the one supporting me now— far away, waving with a smile as if to tell me, "Come on, get moving!"

In that case, I have to keep going, too. As a friend she wouldn't be ashamed of...

Still, the things she blurts out are risky and make those around her panic.

As an idol, saying you have someone you like is still immature.

But that's okay. Because she's just an "aspiring" idol right now. And maybe a one-sided crush is still within the safe zone, right?

"I wonder... should I have shown Ayanokoji-kun this side of her sooner...?"

Her hardworking appearance, her positivity, her bright smile...

If he had seen all that, could it have changed the way he felt about our class?

"...No."

Probably not.

Surely, in Ayanokoji-kun's heart, her existence has vanished. If it were to sprout again, it wouldn't be for the girl she once was, but for the person she's grown into.

Not the old her who could do nothing back at Advanced Nurturing High School— But the idol on the other side of this screen, fighting with all her might.

And if that day ever comes, I hope she'll say something like this:

“Thanks to that time, I became stronger. But I'm not interested in you anymore.”

I bet even Ayanokoji-kun would be caught off-guard by that.

“No... she'd never say something like that.”

She would probably express sincere gratitude. Not as an idol with a hidden side. But as an awkward idol fighting only with her true self.

“Do your best.”

I cheer for her through the screen.

Right now, I can't see her any other way, can't hear her voice anywhere else. And my voice doesn't reach her. But I won't stop.

“Do your best.”

Over and over, as many times as it takes.

“I’ll do my best this coming year, too... so that when we meet again outside, I won’t make a fool of myself.”

She’s already left me behind long ago. So no matter what happens, I can’t just stand still. I have to run to catch up.

I don’t have time to be discouraged by Ayanokoji-kun’s transfer. Let’s work hard— together. And one year from now, I’ll definitely come to see you.

“Do your best, Airi.”

I called out her name and smiled at her through the screen.



# Shiraishi Asuka: A Different Pair of Ears

Pressing my phone to my right ear, I closed my eyes and calmed my heart.

“You must have heard of ‘*Asuka the Hundred-Man Slayer*.’ You’ve at least come across that nickname, right?”

Ryoko-san’s voice, high and clear, always sounds pleasant no matter when I hear it.

“...Is that rumor...true...?”

“Absolutely. A lie wouldn’t spread this far.”

Yoshida-kun's voice, I don't dislike it, but it's flat and uninteresting.

“So it’s not about a hundred friends?”

The next moment, reacting to Ayanokoji-kun's voice reaching my ears, I slowly opened my eyes.

“Ah...yes, that voice...”

As if my body was trembling with excitement, A shiver rushed from my ears to my brain, and then throughout my whole body.

*An inorganic, colorless, emotionless voice.*

*A voice most unsuitable for observation, impossible to analyze.*

And yet, why does it set my heart racing like this?

Is it because its essence is unorthodox?

Violence and domination, strategy and deceit, that voice could carry out anything and everything.

“I told you I’m not interested!”

To the point that Yoshida-kun's voice, which I shouldn't dislike, suddenly feels like noise.

I've become completely absorbed with his voice.

“What happens if the total goes to two hundred? Does she become the Two-Hundred-Man Slayer?”

I want to know what impression he has of me— how he feels. Whether it’s admiration or disgust, I don’t mind either way. Just let me hear it in that wonderful voice.

“I guess I feel respect for her, if anything. She’s our age, yet managed to do that with a hundred people. It’s honestly kind of amazing.”

“Eh? You really think that? ...You do seem genuine about it.”

“I believe any specialist in any field deserves respect, don’t they? It might be inappropriate to use examples from my previous class, but it's like in my old class, someone excelling in basketball like Sudo, or swimming like Onodera, or sewing like Inogashira.”

“As I thought, you definitely have some unusual ways of thinking, Ayanokoji-kun.”

Reluctantly, I pulled the phone away from my ear. I can't hold back any longer. From here on, I want to hear your voice directly, not through a phone.

“Sakayanagi-san. Please leave the rest to me.”

I stood up from the sofa and headed outside, where he was waiting for me.

# Afterword

Hello—I am Kinugusa. How have you been lately? Here we are in 2025 and I look forward to your continued support again this year.

My recent problem is pillows. Considering the strain on my neck and back, I'm looking for my Ideal pillow. But I can't seem to find one. I've probably been replacing them for the past one or two years.

Once, when I bought a custom pillow for a huge sum of money, I felt like this was it. After using it for a while, I realised that it wasn't.

The height is important, but recently I've noticed that pillows that are too bouncy or hard just don't suit me. But I also don't like it if it's too soft or sinks too much.

So my endless quest for the ideal pillow will likely continue without any end. I really want my Ideal pillow.

That's enough small talk for now, let's talk a little bit about You-zitsu. Finally, the story reaches its final year of high school.

In the story only 2 years have passed, but in the real world, it will soon be a milestone of 10 years. I feel like I've aged a lot along with all you readers.

I think the third-year arc will be around the same volume as the first-year and second-year arcs, but please take this with a grain of salt.

And finally, what are your goals for this year? I considered many things, but in the end—

It came down to working harder.

I'd also like to try lots of new things.

I hope the day will come in the near future when I can talk about that.

Well then, everyone— see you in the next volume!

# Translation Team Afterword

And that's a wrap! Year 3 has officially begun, and finally, we're back to the class battles like in Year 1!

We had lot of fun working on this volume (shoutout to Morishita for giving us a hard time with her puns 🤔).

Sad to see how it turned out for Ryuen, Hoping he bounces back soon. And Shiraishi... What's up with her? Sakayanagi entrusted such an important task with her? There must be something we don't know about her. That is Exciting!

Anyways, This volume took us about 7 days to translate and upload, and the PDF/Epub versions took around another week! Thanks so much for your support and patience.

We're also cooking up some big plans beyond just translations, so keep an eye out!

For Updates, sneak peeks and other content, follow us here:

Website: <https://animeanyway.com>

Telegram: <https://t.me/animeanyway>

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Thanks for reading, and we'll keep doing our best in the future!

# Credits

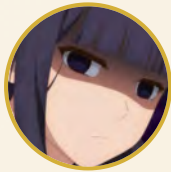


**Kiyo** ~ *otsu*

This volume has been a blast to translate! What an intro for the 3rd year!

Introductions of the new characters and the reveals later on... Seriously Sakayanagi put Shiraishi upto something and now I really can't wait to see what it is. It just makes me more excited for the translations of the future volumes!

Anyways, Thanks for reading and looking forward to your support in the future as well!



**Chi ver** — *morishita hater*

I hate Morishita!



**Tr577** — *menace*

He hates Morishita coz he had to do all the understanding with her puns. Don't worry tho, I will make sure it's him who does all the pun work in the future as well!



**NanotechPikachu** — *atesh*

Google docs is utter garbage. Fries my brain cells and phone.



**Oleksandr** ~

Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed this volume 😊



**Saku** — *a cat*

First and foremost, all hail the greatest plot designer, Kinugasa!! Seriously, I was gripping my hands on the edge of my seat— literally while reading so many of these scenes.

But here's something I genuinely want to share: Have you ever felt how dull our senses are in daily life, just going with the flow so casually? That's something I realized while reading this volume— especially with Ryuen's oversight. Looking back, all the clues were there, the pieces to figure out what the "it" might be. If only we could take a step back, resist the urge to get swept up in the moment, and stop ourselves from filling in the blanks with assumptions... maybe we could've predicted some of these twists ourselves. Way too much work, but there's something uniquely fun about this series, about how it makes me reflect on myself while enjoying the story.

That said, I loved this volume. It lived up to expectations, and now there's so much to look forward to, more fun ahead. Hope you enjoyed it too!

A quick intro: I'm Saku, one of the proofreaders of this fanTL. You can reach me on Insta (@anitsuru) ><



**RI || Great Love** — *genius lives only 1 story above madness*

Thanks to you readers for your support.





**Akshat** ~

Had Fun 😊



**M Mickey** — *shiina lover*

Really want shiina to have more screen time in the next volume! Heck- I want her to have more screen time in every volume!



**Khab** ~

Thanks once again for your support!

Btw I have been told that my credit will be at the end of the credit list so I am gonna use this opportunity to tell you that don't forget to visit our website and support us there as well! Your support keeps us going and motivates us to work harder!

Well then, we will see you after the release of the next volume! Until then, take care!